Caste and Caste-Based Discrimination among Indian Muslims

Part 1: The domination of ‘high’ caste Muslims that parallels the Hindu case

[Translator's Note: Very little has been written on the existence of caste and caste-based discrimination among the Indian Muslims. 'Upper' caste Muslims, who, although a very small minority among the Indian Muslims, generally deny the existence of caste and caste-based discrimination in the larger Muslim community by arguing that these have no sanction in Islam. However, although these do not have legitimacy in the Quran, their reality cannot be denied. Nor too can the legitimacy that these have sought to be given by numerous supposedly leading Indian Islamic scholars be ignored.

In 2007, **Masood Alam Falahi**, a graduate of a madrasa and then a 27 year-old M.Phil. student at Delhi University, wrote a voluminous, almost 600-page, Urdu book titled Hindustan Mai Zat-Pat Aur Musalman ('Casteism Among Muslims in India'). Weaving together insights from fieldwork and key writings by influential Indian Muslim scholars, including Muslim clerics on the subject of caste, the book is a pioneering study of caste-based discrimination among the Indian Muslims and of the continued domination of 'high' caste Muslims that parallels, in remarkable ways, the Hindu case.

Realising the importance of this pioneering book, I have begun translating key portions of it, which I plan to send out as articles once every few days. Once the translation is complete I hope to publish it as a book.

This instalment is a translation of the first thirty pages of the book titled 'Why I Have Written This Book'. -- **Yoginder Sikand for NewAgeIslam.com**]

Why I Have Written This Book

By Masood Alam Falahi

[Translated from Urdu by **Yoginder Sikand for**

NewAgeIslam.com]

O humankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted (Quran 49: 13)

There are two things that, if they are found among people, take them to the level of infidelity: one is to consider others to be low-born [...] (Saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad contained in the Sahih Muslim)

In 1994, I was a student at a well-known madrasa, the Jamiat ul-Falah, in Bilariyaganj, in Azamgarh district in eastern Uttar Pradesh. I was then in the final year of the alimiyat course. It so happened that the Uttar Pradesh wing of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind had organised a week-long 'Introducing the Quran' programme across the state. Through various activities that formed part of this programme, activists of the Jamaat sought to reach out with Islam's message of brotherhood and equality to Hindus, especially Dalits, trying to invite them to Islam. Accordingly, a Jamaat activist named Hakim Abdur Rauf visited a Dalit locality in Bilariyaganj and delivered a speech to the inhabitants declaring Islam to be the perfect antidote to untouchability, caste-based discrimination and social hierarchy. He told his Dalit listeners that if they became Muslims and entered the fold of Islam, they would be liberated from the terrible degradation that they had been subjected to for centuries, and that all the other Muslims would embrace them as brothers.

After he had finished speaking, a Dalit youth stood out from among the crowd and said, 'Sir, it is true that there is no casteism in Islam. But is your Muslim society free from casteism? The Muslims of the town where you are presently in refuse to marry outside their own respective castes, and in this they are no less strict and particular than the Hindus. They refuse to give their daughters to prospective grooms from other Muslim castes, no matter how well-educated and decent such men may be. Instead, they insist that their daughters marry men from their own caste even if the latter are illiterate.' 'If we accept Islam', the Dalit youth went on, 'which Muslims will agree to inter-marry and inter-dine with us? Who will marry our daughters or give us their daughters to marry?'

It is instructive to note how this Dalit youth's reaction was interpreted by Jamaat activists who heard about this incident. One of these, a member of the Jamaat, is considered to be an 'alim, a learned scholar of Islam, and never tires of talking about promoting 'Islamic revolution' and establishing 'Islamic

government' in India through missionary work among non-Muslim Indians. His response to the Dalit youth's reaction was not to acknowledge the need to launch a movement to end the curse of casteism among the Muslims of the country. Instead, he cynically remarked, 'Some people concoct lame excuses so as not to accept Islam because they know that if they embrace Islam they are bound to be confronted with problems.'

I am grateful to God that my own family is free from the cancer of casteism. Once, two 'ulema friends of my brother came to meet him. One of these had married outside his caste, and the other maulvi teased him for this. My brother was very upset with the latter's behaviour and told him, 'You claim to be the leaders of the Muslims, but, despite knowing that caste prejudice and ethnic pride is sheer ignorance and un-Islamic, you are fanning it!'

My late mother was also very against caste and caste-based prejudice, knowing full well that these have no place in Islam. She received numerous proposals for my marriage but always insisted that all she wanted was a pious and well-educated daughter-in-law, whose caste did not matter. My late father was like my mother in this respect.

From a young age itself I lived in a city, along with my brother. The environment in cities is quite different from that in the countryside. In cities people are caught up with their own work and do not bother about other people's affairs. That is why as a child I knew nothing about the horrors of casteism and the great damage that it has done to Indian Muslim society.

The Muslims of my ancestral village and the region surrounding it are followers of the rival Deobandi and the Barelvi schools of thought. When they need guidance in religious matters they consult texts written by Deobandi and Barelvi writers, such as the Bahishti Zevar, by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (a Faruqi Shaikh), the Fatawa-e Rizviya by

Maulana Ahmad Riza Khan Barelvi (a Pathan), and the Bahar-e Shariat by Maulana Muhammad Amjad Ali (an Ansari), deeming these to be adequate even if the fatwas contained in these books are wholly wrong in the light of the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

Shortly after the incident that I described above, in which the Dalit youth confronted the activist of the Jamaat-e Islami with bitter truths about our caste-ridden Muslim society, I thought of consulting the Bahishti Zevar in the belief that Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi must certainly have bitterly condemned casteism, caste-based social hierarchy and conventional fiqh-based rules of kufu' or social parity that must guide selection of marital partners in his magnum opus. However, I was completely aghast when I opened the book, to the fourth chapter that discusses in detail the rules of social parity that Maulana Thanvi insisted needed to be strictly followed in contracting marriages. It went completely against what I had expected. I am not exaggerating when I say that what I read sent shivers down my spine and tremors that rent my heart. Till then I had thought that caste, caste-based discrimination and conventional fiqh-derived notions of kufu' or social parity that governed the choice of marital partners were all a social construct, a product of the influence of Hinduism and Hindu society on the Indian Muslims. However, what I discovered, to my utter horror, was that Maulana Thanvi had declared all of this to be an integral part of the Islamic shariah simply because these are legitimised in the traditional books of fiqh. To make matters worse, he did so without providing any legitimacy or proof from the Quran and the Sunnah. In this way, he legitimised the division of Muslims into what he considered 'high' (unch) and 'low' (neech), 'noble' (sharif) and 'despicable' (razil) groups on the basis of individuals' birth in particular social or caste-like groups.

How, I asked myself in shock, could Muslims be at all branded in this fashion as 'despicable'? God forbid! Is it not

ridiculous? Maulvi Thanvi went further and even declared that newly-converted Muslims (nau musalman) were not the social equals of other Muslims, and that inter-marriage between the two was not advisable. And so we can very well say, 'He whom we thought was a Messiah turned out to be a Hulagu Khan'.

Reading what Maulvi Thanvi had to say on the subject, my distress knew no bounds. I was appalled at how all this was being associated with Islam and being wrongly sought to be legitimised in its name. Did the ulema have no idea that this was giving Islam such a bad name? Did they not realise how it was posing an immense hurdle in the spread of Islam? Did they not feel the need to struggle against caste, a system and ideology that has no sanction whatsoever in Islam? I must here mention that I spoke to a number of ulema from various Muslim groups or jamaats about this. With the exception of a very few who admitted that the ulema of their respective schools of thought who had defended caste and caste-based hierarchies had made a grave blunder, they simply refused to acknowledge that these scholars had grievously erred. Instead of critiquing them, they tried to defend their views by resorting to all sorts of casuistry.

In the final year of the fazilat course at the Jamiat ul-Falah we had to do a course on Comparative Religions., which was taught by Maulana Anis Ahmad Falahi Madani, who belonged to the Shaikh caste. In his lectures the Maulana explained to us the theory and history of the varna system of the Hindus and their practice of untouchability. He told us that caste-discrimination, caste-based social hierarchy and the conventional fiqh rules of kufu' were a product of the Hindu influence on the Indian Muslims. He also clearly indicated that all this was further supported and legitimised by the ulema and the fuqaha, scholars of fiqh, themselves, and by numerous influential fiqh texts. At the same time, he insisted that all this was diametrically opposed to the very spirit of Islam. The Maulana elaborated, in great detail, on the terrible damage that this had caused to Muslims and to the

cause of Islam over the centuries. He also told us how political parties routinely used the existence of caste-based hierarchies among Muslims and Hindus for promoting their own interests. He insisted that we must struggle against all casteism for it had no sanction in Islam at all.

By this time I had numerous unanswered questions in my mind about caste-discrimination and social hierarchy among Muslims and the conventional fiqh rules about kufu'. I am indebted to Maulana Madani for convincingly answering many of them. I was greatly inspired by what he taught us. He convinced me that we needed to put an end to caste-based practices in Muslim society, and for this purpose I began reading all that I could on the subject.

I was curious to learn to what extent caste-based discrimination was actually practised among the Muslims. The best way to do so was, of course, to travel around and see things for myself. Once, during our vacations, I went to my grandmother's village, Dardi, which is in Sitamarhi district in Bihar. There I met with Muhammad Abbas, a man from the Shaikh caste, who was known for his stern opposition to caste. He had arranged for his sons to marry a girl from the Ansari caste. In the course of our conversation, he related the following incident. Once, two Muslim men from a certain village in Sitamarhi district travelled to another village in the district for some work. There, they met a man from the Shaikh caste, who asked them their names and that of their village. When he learned where they were from he asked them, 'Are there really any Muslims in that village at all? I have heard that only Julahas, Kabadis (Rain, Kunjeras) and Dhuniyas and so on live there.'

During that visit to my grandmother's village I met another man who told me of a settlement near his village where three families belonging to a marginalised Muslim caste live under the constant and relentless oppression of Muslims of the Shaikh caste. The former sought to resist this oppression by migrating to a nearby town. Some members of their family

even secured government jobs. This escalated their conflict with the Shaikhs, and one day the two groups came to blows. The 'low' caste Muslims, although less in number, managed to badly beat up a number of Shaikhs. The incensed Shaikhs then lodged a complaint at the police station claiming that, as they put it, 'Low caste people had rioted against Muslims.' They did not mention that these 'low' castes were also Muslims—Julahas, Dhuniyas, Kabadis and Qasais.

One day, while in the village, I saw a Muslim man of the Hajjam or barber caste, whom I knew rather well, hurling abuses at the men of the Shaikh community. When I asked him why he was so angry, he told me that a haikh man had mocked him by contemptuously referring to him as 'Hajjma', making fun of his caste. He said that his grandfather was a saint or buzurg and that his tomb is a mazar or Sufi shrine, but, yet, he complained, the Shaikhs refuse to recognise that he was a buzurg because they claimed that it was simply inconceivable for a Hajjam to become a buzurg, as if the two were mutually contradictory.

Incidents like these began to bring before me a true picture of the reality of caste and caste-based discrimination in Muslim society. Shortly after I returned to my madrasa from my vacation in my grandmother's village, I learned of a man who is considered to be a leading Islamic scholar, and who presents himself as passionately committed to spreading Islam and to 'establishing the faith' (iqamat-e din). He is a member of the council of representatives of the Jamaat-e Islami. From very reliable sources I learned that this man insists that 'low' caste Muslims cannot, and should not, inter-marry with 'high' caste Muslims. Nor, he believes, can they be made the head of an army. Nor, too, he insists, can they be prayer-leaders or imams. On hearing about this, another Islamic scholar, who, unlike this other man, is genuinely committed to Islamic missionary work and to 'establishing the faith', bitterly critiqued him and condemned his views as un-Islamic.

Somewhat at the same time another incident took place. It so

happened that the granddaughter of a member of the Jamaat-e Islami, a man of the Shaikh caste, who occupies an important post in the organisation, wanted to marry a man of the Ansari caste. Her family did not agree, and so she escaped from her house. In order to find her, the family even consulted astrologers and magicians. Finally, they located her and brought her back home. Her father and brother then relented somewhat and agreed to her marrying the Ansari boy, but her grandfather, who was wedded to caste prejudice, simply refused, saying, 'If she marries a Julaha my nose will be cut off.' Finally, that hapless girl was forcibly married off to a man from her own Shaikh caste.

It was not that the girl's father and brother did not believe in caste. If they did not, things obviously would not have come to such a pass. I had a long and detailed conversation with her father, and it was apparent that he had strong biases against 'low' caste Muslims. When I told him that I had written against casteism, his reply was that this meant that I was under Satanic influence! His son, the girl's brother, was even more caste conscious than him. Once, when I had to go somewhere on work, he said to me, 'Brother Masood, why do you want to go there? Only low caste people live there.' The people he was referring to were all Muslims—Julahas, Dhuniyas, Kabadis and Qasais.

From these and such like incidents and experiences I developed a new understanding of the extent of the problem of caste in Muslim society. I also realised that many Muslims who never tire of preaching the virtues of Islam and keep talking about the need to 'establish the faith' and even dream of establishing a Caliphate or 'Islamic' rule in India are so fanatically wedded to caste prejudice and to conventional fiqh rules about kufu' that in this they are no different at all from caste conscious Hindus. If, suppose for a moment for argument's sake, a Caliphate indeed comes to be established in India at the hands of such people, I realised that it would not be one structured on the model provided by the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, it would be a carbon copy of the model

suggested by Manu, the putative author of the Manusmriti, that Bible of Brahminism.

As I began reading up on various aspects of caste and as the immensity of the caste problem among Muslims became clearer to me, I decided to write a full-length book on the subject, which is now in your hands. Some aspects of this book may be considered by some readers to be harsh and embarrassing, but, undeterred by this, I feel it my duty to abide by the commandments of God and His Prophet to stand by the truth. As the Holy Quran tells us:

No believing man or believing woman, if God and His messenger issue any command, has any choice regarding that command. Anyone who disobeys God and His messenger has gone far astray (33: 36).

In this book I have, among other issues, discussed the historical background, origins, and development of the institution and ideology of caste in India, and have tried to show how, in all periods of India's history, forces of truth have valiantly struggled against caste and its upholders, the forces of falsehood. I have tried to relate caste with the historical process of the expansion of Islam in India and have also raised serious questions about the hurdles faced in this path, some of which relate to widespread caste prejudices among a sizeable section of the Indian Muslims. Readers of this book will, God willing, be convinced that the widespread caste-based discrimination and fiqh-based rules of kufu' prevalent among the Indian Muslims resemble very closely the Hindu case and, in fact, correspond to the teachings of the Manusmriti. The book highlights the alarming fact that in certain respects, such as with regard to rules governing marriage and caste-based discrimination, there is absolutely no difference between the commandments of the Manusmriti and the rules laid down in the books of Muslim fiqh in the sections that discuss conventional rules and notions of kufu'.

I am grateful to Dr. Fazlur Rahman Faridi (a Faruqi Shaikh)

who very kindly arranged for this book to be serialised in the monthly Urdu journal Zindagi-e Nau, published from New Delhi, spanning a long period, from August 2000 to May 2002 under the title Hindustan Mai Chhoot Chhat Aur Musalman ('Untouchability and Muslims in India') before it was published as a volume. These instalments of my book invoked considerable interest from readers, who sent in letters, both appreciative as well as critical. Of these letters 34 were published in Zindagi-e Nau between October 2000 and September 2002. These letters brought to the fore many new aspects about caste and caste-based discrimination among Muslims that I was not aware of.

In this book I have used terms such as 'Brahminical' and 'Manuvadi'. These terms are not to be taken to refer to any particular caste, but, rather, to a particular mentality that underlies and sustains caste, caste-discrimination, caste-based hierarchies and untouchability. These terms also indicate that supporters of casteism are not restricted to any particular caste, but, rather, can belong to any caste, for that matter. In places where I have talked about certain individuals from particular castes who support casteism, my intention is to indicate only such individuals, and certainly not to make any generalisations about the caste they belong to. This is because, as I just mentioned, supporters of caste prejudice can be found in every case. It is wholly erroneous to make generalisations about all the members of a particular caste. It is not true to say, as some so-called 'low' caste people allege, that all so-called 'upper' people are prejudiced and casteist. Likewise, it is not true that, as some so-called 'upper' caste people claim, that all those who write or work against casteism are from the 'low' castes. That is why I have indicated, where possible, the caste of the individuals whom I have mentioned in this book, although whether their caste origins are really what they claim is another matter.

In my view, the criterion for superiority and status is definitely not caste, but, rather, what the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad lays down in this regard,

which is taqwa, that is to say piety or God consciousness. I do not regard any caste as being 'noble' or 'despicable'. I have tried not to hurt the sentiments of any caste with my words. Despite this, if any reader does feel slighted by my writing I would request her or him to contact me at once and point out where she or he feels I have not lived up to the demands of the truth and justice. If she or he has a genuine point, God willing I will rectify what I have written in the next edition of this book.

Numerous people have helped me in the preparation of this book and I heartily thank them all. The list of names is so long that to catalogue them all would require several pages. Among them are the numerous readers of my articles that were published in the columns of Zindagi-e Nau who sent me their comments or wrote letters to the editor of the journal expressing their views about what I had written. Some of them even took the trouble of coming to meet me.

It would be unjust of me not to mention specifically the names of some people who played a very important role in this book. Maulana Abdur Rahman Khalid Falahi provided me with considerable valuable material from the library of the Jamiat ul-Falah in Bilariyaganj. Maulana Muhammad Jasimuddin Qasmi, then a student at the Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and Abdul Hafiz Khan Salafi Balrampuri, then studying at the Aligarh Muslim University, proofread the entire manuscript. Maulana Abdul Hamid Numani, senior office-bearer of the Jamiat ul-Ulema-e Hind, Maulana Muhammad Tahir Madni (Shaikh), rector of the Jamiat ul-Falah, Maulana Abul Baqa Nadvi (Shaikh), former rector of the Jamiat ul-Falah, Professor Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui Nadvi, former Professor in the Departmetnt of Islamic Studies at the Aligarh Muslim University, Dr. Maulana Obaidullah Fahad Falahi (Pathan) of the Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Maulana Khalid Saifullah Rahmani Qasmi (Syed), General-Secretary of the Islamic Fiqh Academy(India), Maulana Abdul Bar Asri Falahi (Shaikh), former lecturer in Arabic literature and Hadith at the Jamiat ul-Falah, and Dr.

Maulana Muhammad Razi ul-Islam Nadvi (Pathan), Assistant Editor of Tahqiqat-e Islami, Aligarh and of the monthly Zindagi-e Nau, Delhi, were great sources of help and encouragement. In the preparation of the second edition of this book, the assistance of my very dear friends Shamshad Alam, Niyaz Ahmad Falahi, Maulana Fayyaz Ahmad Falahi, and Abdullah Mansur was indispensable.

It would be nothing short of tragic if I forgot to mention the debt of gratitude that I owe to Dr. Fazlur Rahman Faridi, editor of the monthly Zindagi-e Nau, member of the Advisory Council of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind, and founding-member of the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. It was he who very kindly arranged for the book to be first serialised in Zindagi-e Nau. Many readers of the journal praised these articles. However, others vehemently opposed their publication. Yet, Dr. Faridi did not cave in to their pressure. Many publishers approached me and offered to publish this book. Dr. Faridi was the first to do so, and he also informed me that some people wanted to translate the text into various other languages. It is, in large measure, because of the efforts and help of Dr. Faridi that this book has finally been published. I am grateful to him for writing a foreword to the book.

I must also profusely thank Dr. Muhammad Abdul Haq Ansari, former amir of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind, who also took an interest in this book, and who, on the suggestion of Dr. Faridi, gave his consent, verbally as well as in writing, to the publishing of this book by the Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, the official publishing wing of the Jamaat-e Islami. Accordingly, as per his orders, this book had reached the final stages before printing when a section of members of the Jamaat-e Islami who support casteism and want caste discrimination, which has no sanction whatsoever in Islam, to survive in order to further their own interests, placed immense pressure on Dr. Ansari and Dr. Faridi to stop the publication of the book. The manuscript had already been carefully examined by Dr. Faridi, and I had removed the sections that he had suggested be excised. However, when the

supporters of caste in the Jamaat-e Islami succeeded in preventing the publication of my book from the Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, I included back in the text all this excised material and added some additional material.

After the manuscript was returned to me by the Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, I showed it to Dr. Syed Anwar Alam Pasha, who teaches Urdu at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and asked him to critically examine it and point out what he felt were its faults and limitations since my intention was to promote honest discussion on the subject of caste among Muslims and not to fan strife and dissension. I am grateful to him for acceding to my request. He read the manuscript carefully and, in a note to me, said he found nothing wrong or unacceptable in it and advised me to get it published as soon as possible. 'The Jamaat-e Islami', he wrote, 'must seek forgiveness for halting the publication of such a good book.'

I am thankful to Mr. Inayatullah, senior advocate of the Supreme Court of India, who looked through the text from the legal perspective and made some important and necessary corrections. Many thanks, too, to Mr. Syed Qazi Shamsuddin of Al-Qazi Publications, New Delhi, for publishing the first Urdu edition of this book, and to the Ideal Foundation, Mumbai, for its second Urdu edition.

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Part 2: Indian Muslim Society in the Shadow of Casteism

By Masood Alam Falahi
(Translated from Urdu by Yoginder Sikand, for New Age Islam)

[Translator's Note: This is a translation of Dr. Faridi's Introduction to Masood Alam Falahi's Urdu book Hindustan Mai Zat-Pat Aur Musalman ('Casteism Among Muslims in India') [Ideal Foundation, Mumbai, 2009, pp. 32-35. For the sake of brevity, I have deleted some lines that I did not find directly relevant. I have sought to present the spirit of the text and, hence, have not made a literal translation throughout.- **Yoginder Sikand, NewAgeIslan.com**]

Indian Muslim Society in the Shadow of Casteism

By Dr. Fazlur Rahman Faridi
[Translated from Urdu by **Yoginder Sikand, for NewAgeIslam.com**]

When I received the first instalment of a series of articles by my dear brother Masood Alam Falahi for publication in Zindagi-e Nau I had no idea that these articles would, in the future, take the form of a voluminous book. As successive instalments began being published in the journal, it dawned on me that this series represented an in-depth analysis of a painful and dark side of the history of the Muslims of India.

The basis of Islam is tauhid, the oneness of God, the very opposite of shirk or polytheism. Tauhid clearly suggests a direct relationship between human beings and God, with no role whatsoever for intermediaries. Tauhid liberates human beings from man-made religious beliefs and complicated, twisted philosophies. All along, efforts have been made, consciously and otherwise, by purohits, pundits, maulvis and so on, to erect high walls between human beings and their Creator and to dilute tauhid. However, with the grace of God, these efforts have all miserably failed.

Lamentably, however, another basic principle of Islam, which follows from the belief in tauhid—the fundamental oneness of all human beings—did not escape being cruelly trampled

upon. And in this regard enemies played less of a role than the flag-bearers of Islam themselves. In India, the indigenous philosophical and religious systems that were based on caste and caste discrimination played havoc with the Islamic insistence on social equality. This assault took various forms, such as exaggerated respect for the Syeds (takrim-e sadat), which led to Muslim society being divided in the name of Islam itself between the self-styled ashraf and the so-called arzal. It appeared in the shape of distorted rules of kufu' governing marriage that converted the Prophet's purely practical instructions on the matter into what later came to be viewed as religious commandments. While at a certain stage of Muslim history it was considered, purely from a pragmatic point of view, that only members of the Quraish tribe could become Caliph, it came to be understood as a permanent Islamic injunction. And so on. The implications of these wrongful interpretations were so deep-rooted and widespread that the Muslim community in India soon came to be completely suffocated by the curse of caste. And that is how Muslim Sultans, ulema and 'ordinary' folk all audaciously agreed to sabotage and grossly violate this eternal instruction of the Quran:

Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct (49:13).

Everyone—Syeds, Shaikhs, Mughals, Pathans and Shudras—was complicit in completely distorting the image of the Muslim millat and in promoting division and strife within it. God has blessed our respected brother Masood Alam Falahi with an extraordinary capacity to research and analyse so as to lift the curtain that veils this terrible reality and to encourage Muslim society to consider urgently-needed reforms in this regard. We have all been silently witnessing these glaring and dangerous divisions of caste in our society but we lacked the courage to talk about this subject and even to indicate how completely opposed to Islam all of this is.

One tragic consequence of efforts to seek to wrongly legitimise the philosophy of caste division in Islam has been that when vast numbers of people who were oppressed by the Indian caste system embraced Islam, attracted by its teachings of equality and human unity, they had to face the same sort of filth and oppression here, too. After converting to Islam, they found that they still remained Bhangis, Chamars, Kunjaras, Qasais and Julahas, and were incorporated as the most 'despicable' classes of Muslim society. On conversion, their names changed but not the way in which they were treated by others. The Muslims were now solidly divided into 'noble' (sharif) and 'despicable' (razil). So sternly was this division maintained that it was given legitimacy even in Islamic schools. Fatwas about marriage and divorce came to be based on the caste of people and the related rules of kufu' that were concocted. Brother Masood has provided us plenty of evidence that very well illustrates all of this. Many people may be angry with what he has written. They might castigate his writings as untimely and inappropriate. Some of them might even claim that caste-based division and discrimination are now vanishing among Muslims and that, therefore, there is thus no need to scratch old wounds.

I have no hesitation in saying that the power of caste is indeed declining today, particularly in the matter of selection of spouses. However, the real reason for this are modern communications and travel, which have been made possible by new technologies and material resources. Because of this, today's youth are being freed from the hold of their homes and societies. They can now increasingly find spouses of their choice themselves. Higher education, especially of a professional sort, have reduced the salience and appeal of caste. All this may have much to commend it, but a painful aspect of this changing reality is that this decline of caste consciousness that should have come about through religious reform and inspiration is, instead, being caused by economic transformations. Transformations wrought by economic motives are, generally speaking, imbalanced, and there is no

need to assume it will not be so in this case as well. Another tragic aspect of this is that these efforts to end caste-based division and discrimination in Muslim society are not a result of religious commitment and activism, but, on the contrary, of increasing irreligiousness and materialism that pose a grave threat to the very identity and character of the Muslim millat. At the same time, we must not forget that caste divisions still remain very strong among the vast majority of the Indian Muslims, and to ignore its consequences is nothing but foolishness.

The adoption of, or adaptation to, the inhuman and horrendously divisive caste system by the Muslims also continues to pose major hurdles in the path of dawah or inviting others to Islam. With what face can Muslims invite Dalits and other oppressed classes to Islam if the latter feel that Islam's commitment to equality and justice is only theoretical, and when they see that, in some cases, arzal or so-called 'low' caste Muslims are forbidden from worshipping in mosques by their so-called ashraf or 'high' caste co-religionists, and when they see that Muslim society is such that if they convert to Islam they will have to face the same sort of demeaning insults as they have had to for centuries? This is why it is an urgent missionary duty to promote, not just through words but, more importantly, through practical social efforts, respect for all human beings based on God consciousness. At this point I want to add that for centuries the ulema and other guides of the Muslim millat have focussed almost all their efforts on the protection of the faith, giving very little attention at all to the fundamental duty of dawah.

The unity of the whole of humankind is the message of Islam. It is a gift presented to suffering humanity. Islam must be seen in this perspective. Social reform is not always an easy process. There is always the danger that it will not be liked or tolerated by some elements, who are bound to oppose criticism. All the same, this effort by Masood Alam Falahi

deserves to be welcomed as constructive and as geared to promoting social reform and the cause of dawah. The bitter truths that he recounts must be patiently listened to. This book backs its claims with copious footnotes, references and reliable quotations. Hence, it would be wrong to say that the author is motivated by a desire for character assassination. He mentions harsh realities in order to express the tremendous pain that stirs his heart. I have examined and judged his text from the perspective of the dawah imperative, which should be of primary concern for us as Muslims. Those committed to dawah must be always ready to bandage wounds and to critique themselves and others where necessary, irrespective of the consequences, even if this means having to face insults and a torrent of fatwas. In this regard, I find this effort by Masood Alam Falahi inspiring and encouraging.

Where Masood Alam Falahi has indicated the weaknesses of present-day Muslim society, he has not forgotten to highlight the true teachings of Islam. Hence, the book is by no means a collection of accusations and criticisms, but, rather, a work that is presented in a very proper perspective.

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Part 3: The Impact of the Aryan Invasion of India

Definition of Caste
According to sociologists, caste refers to a social system characterised by hierarchically-ordered divisions based on birth. In such a system, there is a strict limit to one's choice of occupations, which is, theoretically, inherited over the generations. There are also strict rules that govern and restrict commensality, marriage and other forms of social intercourse between the different castes. At the same time, each caste is interdependent on the other castes for various services. A caste-based society is contrasted with a class-based one, in which, at least in theory, people's status depends on achievement, rather than birth.

The Original Inhabitants of India

Historians continue to debate as to who the original inhabitants of India were, which race they belonged to, and when, if at all, they came to India. It is surmised that the original inhabitants of the land were a dark-skinned, short-statured people similar to the aborigines of Australia, and that they were later followed by the Dravidians. It is widely believed that fair-skinned Aryans invaded India from the north-west and vanquished the Dravidians. They enslaved many of them, turning them into 'low' caste menials, forcing many others to flee down south. Some of these people who never submitted in the face of Aryan terror fled to the forests in the mountains of central and eastern India. These are today known as Adivasis, and include such communities as the Bhils, Santhals, Oraons, and so on. Their hatred for the Brahmins and other Aryans remains undiminished even today, after thousands of years.

Some historians date the process of the beginnings of a series of Aryan invasions of India to around 2500 B.C.. The crafty Aryans conspired to create dissensions in the ranks of the Dravidians, and managed to defeat them. After this, they subjected them to heinous forms of degradation and oppression, for which they sought to provide religious sanction. This is clearly evident in all the Brahminical texts.

Thus, for instance, the Rig Veda hails the slaughter by the Aryans, supposedly assisted by their gods, of literally hundreds of thousands of Dasyus, a demeaning name for the original people of India. The Aryans raped the Dravidians, that is to say indigenous Indian, women on a massive scale, believing this to be a means for acquiring religious merit. In his Satyarth Prakash, Dayanand Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj, mentions that according to a particular Hindu sect, having sexual intercourse a Chandal woman is like pilgrimage to Kashi, and with a Chamar woman it is like bathing at Prayag. Sex with a Dhobi woman is like visiting Mathura, while with a loose woman it is like undertaking the pilgrimage to Ayodhya. This is one way how the Aryans sought to insult and degrade the Dravidians.

Caste in the Hindu Scriptures

The Hindu scriptures are replete with many other such demeaning references to the indigenous Indians who dared to oppose the Aryans. After killing vast numbers of them, the Aryans enslaved the rest of these people as Shudras and Untouchables. They subjected them to barbaric laws in the name of religion so that they would never dare to raise their heads again. The Aryans enslaved the Indians not just physically but psychologically as well. In order to preserve their hegemony, they devised the caste system, and sought to give it religious legitimacy through their scriptures. In this way, they were able to quash all feelings of resentment and revolt among the vanquished. They invented the theory of reincarnation through which they held out what they claimed was the possibility that ‘low’ caste people could be reborn as Brahmins in their next life but only if they strictly abided by the rules and cruelties of the caste system in their present life. Gradually, the indigenous Indians fell prey to the Brahmins’ propaganda and, taught by the Brahmins to hate their own indigenous culture, were slowly absorbed into the Hindu or Brahminical religion. The Brahmins referred to them with demeaning names, such as ‘Das’ or ‘slave’, and even today many of their descendants continue to use such titles, afraid

that if they were to give up such names, the gods might be infuriated with them.

The different social groups that formed the Hindu social order remained endogamous, and many of them had different religious beliefs, but one belief was shared by all of them—that of the alleged superiority of the Brahmins. According to certain foreign travellers in the medieval ages, some Hindu non-Brahmin kings would decline to have sex with their newly-wed queens on the first night of their marriage. Instead, they would present that honour to some allegedly respectable Brahmins, and would even pay them for this. This, for instance, is said to have been the practice in some parts of Kerala. In large parts of India, non-Brahmins believed that if they drank the water in which a Brahmin had washed his feet they would acquire great spiritual merit. This practice has not entirely died out. None other than the first President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who belonged to the Shudra Kayasth community, washed the feet of a large number of Brahmins in Benaras. Then, collecting the dirty water in which their feet had been cleaned, he showered it on himself and his wife, and even drank it. This happened soon after he had been sworn in to the top-most post in the country. When some newspapers criticised him for this, his answer was that he had become the President of India only because of the blessings of the Brahmins.

Indian history is replete with stories of the evil genius of Brahmins who were fiercely wedded to caste. In his Satyarth Prakash, Dayanand Saraswati, himself a Brahmin, speaks of the bizarre beliefs invented by the Brahmins in order to make merry, wallow in luxury and rule over others, going to the extent of claiming to be gods and as beings worthy of worship. They declared themselves to be bhu devtas or 'gods on earth'. They went so far as declaring that without propitiating them, people could never hope to enter heaven. If they refused to serve them, the non-Brahmins were told, they would be dispatched to hell. They invented stern rules about caste which they filled their scriptures with, including

the Vedas, the Puranas, the Mahabharat, the Ramayan, the Gita and the Smritis.

One of these texts is the Manusmriti, the law-code of the Brahminical Hindus, which is said to be a commentary on the Vedas. It is also considered to be a summary of, and, at the same time, a detailed commentary on, all the ancient Hindu texts. It contains a huge number of laws and regulations, especially about caste. Even from a superficial reading it appears that a principal function of the text is to legitimise Brahminical supremacy and the degradation of the indigenous Indians. It claims that the Brahmins were produced from Brahma's head, while the Shudras emanated from his feet. It insists that the Brahmins are 'twice-born', in contrast to the 'once-born' Shudras. It lays down that God has deemed only one work fit for a Shudra, and that is to cheerfully serve and slave for the 'upper' castes. It recommends that Brahmins should have 'auspicious' names, while those for Shudras should connote degradation. It recommends abject poverty for the Shudras. It claims that a Brahmin, even if he is ignorant and of bad character, is an exalted god worthy of being worshipped and can preach to a king. It insists that Shudras be cruelly punished for any small infraction of the barbarous rules of caste, and ordains that those who provide Shudras with religious knowledge will be destined to perdition in hell. If a Shudra so much as hears the Vedas being recited, it announces, boiling lead should be poured into his ears. If he recites any verse of the Vedas, his tongue should be lopped off. If he memorises any part of the Veda, his body should be split into two.

Such teachings exalting the Brahmins and demeaning the Shudras are also found in the Ramcharitmanas of Tusli Das, which is considered a very holy book by many Hindus. Tulsi Das claims that a person who criticises Brahmins has to pass through many different hells, after which he is reborn as a crow. He writes that even an abusive, violent Brahmin is worthy of being worshipped, while even if a Shudra is a great scholar he can never be so. He equates Shudras and women

with drums and animals, and says that all of them are fit to be beaten. If anyone hits a Brahmin or even simply intends to do so, he writes, he will be sent to hell and will be reborn as an ass.

Brahminical law-givers and religionists not only trapped the indigenous Indians with such brutal laws but also ensured that it was difficult, indeed almost impossible, for them to break the shackles of these laws. In this way, they ensured that the Brahminists could continue their unquestioned hegemony. They insisted that every caste must strictly abide by its varna or jati dharma or caste duty, and laid down that ensuring this was the principal function of the ruler.

Enforcing the Rule of Caste

Followers of Brahminism and Manuvad worship cows, pigs, dogs, cats, donkeys, snakes, scorpions and even the sexual organs of males and females, while, at the same time, they believe in texts whose authors preach that vast numbers of people—the indigenous Indians—must be treated as worse than vermin. To expect people who follow such books to be kind to those people who their religious texts so brutally oppress is like hoping for warmth from ice or coldness from fire. This is well exemplified throughout our country's history.

In Brahminical texts, Chandals are termed as the most despicable creatures in the world. Even the air that blows against their bodies is deemed to be polluted. Simply to look at them is regarded as a sign of ritual pollution. They were forbidden, on the pain of death, from entering the localities inhabited by the so-called 'high' castes.

It was not just 'ordinary' 'high' caste people who firmly held on to such cruel beliefs and who practised these rules. Even figures whom the Hindus consider as their deities and religious heroes are said to have done so. For instance, in the Mahabharat, Dronacharya refused to teach Eklavya archery simply because of his 'low' caste. Eklavya was not disheartened byt his refusal, and learnt the art on his own.

This greatly enraged Arjun, who complained to Dronacharya that Eklavya, a Shudra, had even excelled him. Dronacharya made the hapless Eklavya sacrifice his own thumb so that, henceforth, he would not be able to wield his bow properly. And that is how Arjun managed to triumph over him.

The behaviour of Ram with regard to the 'low' castes was no different. According to the Valmiki Ramayan, one day, when Ram, along with Sita and Lakshman, was in exile in the forest, he met Shurpanakha, sister of Ravan, who fell in love with him and asked him to marry her. Ram declined, but suggested that she could marry Lakshman instead. But Lakshman, too, refused. Ram indicated to Lakshman that Shurpanakha was of a 'low' caste and ordered him to cut her nose and ears off. Ram refused to marry Shuparnakha simply because she was a Shudra, of the Dravidian race, while he was a Kshatriya.

The Valmiki Ramayan also relates the story of an old Brahmin whose son suddenly died at a very young age. Taking the boy's corpse with him, he entered Ram's court, loudly exclaiming that never before had anyone died at such a tender age. There must certainly be something terrible happening in Ram's kingdom that this had happened, he said, pleading with Ram to bring the lad back to life.

On hearing all this, Ram gathered his ministers to discuss what should be done. Just then, a group of eight Brahmins, including Narad, entered the court. Narad narrated the reason why the Brahmin boy had died. In the earliest times, that is Sat Yug, he said, only Brahmins used to worship and that is why no one died at a young age then, and everyone had a long life. However, in the Treta Yug, the Kshatriyas also began worshipping, because of which Manu and others had to devise the rules of varna, according to which the Brahmins now shared the right to worship with the Kshatriyas, while these two castes were served by the Vaishyas and the Shudras. When the Dwapar Yug would arrive, the Vaishyas, too, would get the right to worship, he said. But in none of

these three ages would the Shudras ever earn the right to worship. However, in the evil age of Kali Yug, some products of what he called shudra yoni (people born from the private parts of Shudra women) would, defying the law of caste, take to worship, he warned. He told Ram that it must certainly be that a Shudra somewhere in his kingdom was engaged in worship so that unnatural events, such as the death of the Brahmin lad, were taking place. It was adharm or a gross violation of religion or dharma, he said, for a Shudra to do so, and if a king did not prohibit adharm from happening in his kingdom, he would be sent to hell. Hence, he advised Ram to search for the Shudra engaged in the supposedly irreligious act of worship and kill him. By doing so, he said, the Brahmin lad would come back to life and dharma would prosper.

On the instigation of Narad, Ram armed himself and set off looking for what Narad had indicated to him was the source of adharm in his kingdom. After much searching, he finally spotted a lake near a mountain where he saw a man engrossed in stern austerities. Ram went up to him, and asked him his name and his caste. The man replied that he was a product of a shudra yoni, and that his name was Shambhukh. He explained that he was engaged in austerities so as to enter heaven in his physical body and attain the status of a dev or god.

As Shambhukh was speaking, Ram unsheathed his sword and lopped the man's head off. At the very same moment, so the Valmiki Ramayan claims, in far away Ayodhya the Brahmin's son came back to life, and the gods in the heavens congratulated Ram for his action, showering him with fragrant flowers. Greatly pleased with Ram for killing Shambhukh, the gods collectively addressed him as a god and an exalted soul who, they said, had done the work of the gods by slaying their enemy. By his act, they went on, they had prevented a Shudra from entering the abode of the gods. For this they offered to give Ram whatever he wanted. In response, Ram asked that the Brahmin's son be brought back to life, and the deities obliged.

Many questions can be raised about this story, but because this would inevitably unnecessarily lengthen our discussion I leave this work to the minds of my readers to engage with. This and other such stories contained in the Brahminical religious texts very clearly prove the complete falsity of the argument that in the early period of what we today call Hinduism caste was based on achievement or karma and not on birth. In this story Narad and Shambhukh both use the term shudra yoni, which clearly indicates a that even in this early period that many Hindus regard as their 'golden age' caste was based on birth and not on actions.

Commiserating with the plight of the Shudras, the Indian poet-philosopher Allama Muhammad Iqbal, whose ancestors were Kashmiri Brahmins, penned the following couplet:

Ah Shudar ke liye Hindustan gham khana hai

Dard-e insani se is basti ka dil begana hai

O! For the Shudras India is an abode of sorrow

The heart of this locality is bereft of empathy for the plight of humanity

Part 4: Early Anti-Aryan Movements in India

It is a law of nature that when oppression reaches its zenith, people begin to rise up in revolt. Oppressed people raise their voice and protest, refusing to accept their conditions. Yet, there is no guarantee that their revolutionary stirrings will necessarily succeed. This is precisely what happened in the case of numerous revolutionary movements that emerged against Brahminism in the early period of Indian history. The Shudras and a large section of the Vaishyas were, from the very beginning, victims of the oppression of the Brahmins and, therefore, harboured deep resentment against them. The Kshatriyas had entered into an alliance with the Brahmins, patronising the latter in return for the religious sanction they received from them for their rule. Yet, a large section of the Kshatriyas became increasingly resentful of Brahminical hegemony and despotism. This was reflected, for instance, in the emergence of powerful anti-Brahminical movements led by Mahavir and Gautam Buddha, both of them scions of ruling Kshatriya clans.

Jainism and Buddhism

It is not clear if Mahavir was committed to ending untouchability. Unlike the Buddha, he did not mount a radical critique of the caste system, although, to begin with, all castes were welcome, at least in theory, in the Jain fold. It seems that Mahavir did not disagree with the Brahminical theory that birth in a particular caste is determined by actions in one's previous life or lives.

In contrast to Mahavir, the Buddha launched a frontal attack on the caste system, and welcomed people of all castes to the community that he spawned. Yet, he proved unable to extirpate the caste system, which, by then, had become deeply-rooted in the Indian psyche. It cannot be said that destroying the caste system was his principal concern or mission, but it is true that the ideology of*varna* was not the basis of the society he wanted to bring into being. Undeniably, the Buddha powerfully decried casteism and Brahminical chauvinism and insisted on love and concern for all creatures. The Buddha is said to have advised his one of

his followers thus:

> O *bhikku*! Just as the Ganga, Jamuna and all other rivers flow into the sea and lose their earlier names and locations and start being called as the sea, similarly, when Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, the four *varnas*, following my advice, join the Sangha, they lose their earlier family, customs and names and come to be called as *bhikkus*.[i]

From this quotation it is clear that while the total destruction of the caste system was not the intention of the Buddha, he passionately opposed caste-discrimination, which was the basis of the Brahminical or Hindu religion and society. This is readily apparent when the Buddha says, 'Because of goodness and purity a lowly man becomes a Brahmin. No one is truly a Brahmin by birth. Rather, only by good deeds can one become a true Brahmin.' Elsewhere, he stresses, 'No one is a Chandal or a Brahmin by birth. Only by virtue of his actions does he become a Brahmin or a Chandal.' Similarly, he lays down, 'He alone is a true Brahmin who practices truth, love, cleanliness and mercy, who is generous and conquers his desires, and who has freed himself from ignorance and sin.'[ii]

It would not be wrong to say that these lofty ethical commandments of the Buddha failed to make much of a dent in the edifice of caste or greatly undermined Brahminism. One reason was that Buddhism gradually veered in the direction of world renunciation, a tendency not at all conducive to social transformation. Consequently, demolishing the caste system and putting an end to the degradation of the oppressed castes did not remain a central focus of Buddhism in the centuries after the Buddha's death. The *bhikkus*, having renounced the world, were not, as a rule, inspired to make efforts to critique caste oppression or to bring about radical social change. They were satisfied simply with following the rules of the Sangha.

The well-known historian V.R.Narla, who served for many years as member of the Rajya Sabha, mentions in his book *The Truth About Geeta* that the Buddha was a reformist, and not, as is often imagined, a social revolutionary. The social changes that the Buddha desired, which, Narla claims, were by no means radical, did not materialise. His teachings did not lead to the creation of a new and vastly different social order. It is true, Narla writes, that the Buddhist Sangha did not recognise caste within it, and that even men from what were regarded as the lowest castes could become*bhikkus* and enjoy an equal status with other *bhikkus*. Yet, this did not mean that outside the Sangha caste ceased to play any role. While the Buddha insisted that caste would not matter inside the Sangha and that the caste of a *bhikku* made no difference, it can be said, Narla argues, that he silently consented to caste in the wider society outside the Sangha. It is thus factually incorrect, Narla maintains, to claim that the Buddha destroyed the chains of caste and liberated the oppressed castes.[iii]

From all this it appears that both Jainism and Buddhism preached religious equality but not radical social equality. Obviously, this approach to equality was hardly sufficient for the overall emancipation of the oppressed castes and for mounting an effective challenge to Brahminism. Yet, the message of religious equality preached by Mahavir and, especially, the Buddha attracted vast numbers of people from the oppressed castes. Along with the Shudras, many Vaishyas and several Kshatriyas, groaning under Brahminical hegemony, were attracted to these religions.

Gradually, Jainism and, especially, Buddhism managed to gain such popularity that, especially in large parts of northern India, Hinduism was gravely threatened with extinction. It was at this time that the centre of Brahminism shifted down south. The Brahminists burned with the desire for revenge, to bring back the Shudras, their former slaves, under their hegemony. They plotted all sorts of conspiracies to extirpate Jainism and Buddhism and to restore Brahminical rule.

Brahmins began to infiltrate the Buddhist Sangha, to Brahminise or dilute the Buddha's original teachings and to destroy the Sangha from within. At the same time, they connived with Hindu kings to launch a slaughter, on a massive scale, of Jains and Buddhists, of both priests as well as lay persons. Jain and Buddhist monasteries and temples across the country were brutally destroyed or converted into Hindu shrines. The Brahmin king Pushyamitra Sanga announced a huge reward for every head of a Buddhist *bhikku* brought to him. The Shaivite king of Gaur cut down the tree in Bodh Gaya under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. As Professor R. S. Sharma very rightly notes, it must not be thought that the extermination of Buddhism from India was simply a result of the ideological or missionary counter-offensive of the Brahminical revivalists. Rather, a key role in this project was played by terror and violence unleashed against Jains and Buddhists on a very large scale, which left the remaining Buddhists with just two alternatives—to either flee to other countries or else to embrace Islam. Massive numbers of Buddhists chose both these options.[iv]

This argument is echoed by S.L.Sagar, a well-known Dalit Buddhist scholar, who writes that Hindu revivalist kings ensured the destruction of Buddhism in India by the use of the sword, massacring vast numbers of Buddhists all across the country. Many others were forced to flee to other lands. To reinforce their campaign of hate against the Buddhists, the Brahmins filled their books with scurrilous references to the Buddha and branded the Buddhists as Untouchables.[v] Similar terror tactics were used by Brahmins and their allied Hindu kings against the Jains, as has been noted by numerous scholars.

The Jains and Buddhists who remained in India were absorbed into the larger Hindu fold and deprived of their separate identity. The Jains probably deliberately adopted many Hindu practices in order to be considered more acceptable, or less offensive to, the Brahmins. In order to

bring the Shudras, most of who had turned Buddhists, back into the Hindu fold and under Brahmin hegemony, the Brahminical revivalists made some key modifications in their own religion and adopted certain Buddhist practices, such as vegetarianism, and even claimed the Buddha to have been an incarnation of their god Vishnu. In this way, they plotted to make Hinduism appear more attractive or acceptable to the Buddhist Shudras so as to bring them, once again, under the domination.

To further reinforce their tirade against Buddhism the Brahminical revivalists concocted even more scriptures that contained foul abuses against the Buddha. This is clearly evidenced in the case of the*Mahabharat*, which contains very negative references to Buddhists, and in the *Ramayan*, where Ram is made to call the Buddha a thief. The Brahminical revivalists sent out missionaries across the country to engage with Buddhist and Jain scholars in debate and vanquish them and then drag them into the Hindu or Brahminical fold. A figure who played a key role in this regard was the eight century Shankaracharya, a Brahmin from Kerala, who is credited with philosophical disputations with the Buddhists and with the ultimate triumph of Brahminism.

Elaborating on the final victory of the Brahmins over Buddhism, 'Guru' Golwalkar, supremo of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, writes in his *Bunch of Thoughts* that the Buddhists wanted to destroy India's ancient heritage (read Brahminism) and make the Indians (read Hindus) lose their connection with their religion. He presents the Buddhists as 'traitors' to the 'motherland' and Shankaracharya as the 'saviour' of the Hindus and their religion, which he equates with Indian nationalism. He portrays Shankaracharya and his disciples as spreading 'light' amidst the darkness, which he equates with Buddhism.[vi] From Golwalkar's writings it is clearly evident that votaries of Brahminism consider all religions as treacherous that advocate any degree of social equality.

Buddhism is now almost completely extinct in the land of its birth. It has been so completely Hinduised that today, according to the Indian legal system, Buddhists are considered to be Hindus in matters of personal law. In 1956, Dr. Ambedkar, the great leader of the oppressed castes, renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism in order to achieve liberation from the curse of caste. Just two years prior to his conversion, he had played a key role in the reform of Hindu Personal Law in the form of the passing of the Hindu Code Bill. Yet, even after his conversion to Buddhism, he did not demand a separate Buddhist Personal Law. Nor did he demand that Buddhists not be governed by Hindu Personal Law. This is an indication of how completely Buddhism and its adherents had been absorbed into the Hindu fold and had lost their separate identities. In the wake of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism many hundreds of thousands of other Dalits have followed suit but, yet, their social conditions and status remain unchanged and they also continue to follow many Hindu practices and a range of Hindu beliefs.

This, then, briefly, is the tragic story of two of the key anti-Brahminical movements in the pre-Muslim phase of Indian history.

[i] Quoted in Sultan Ahmad Islahi, *Islam ka Tassavur-e Masavat*, Markazi Maktaba-e Islami, New Delhi, 1985, p.41
[ii] Ibid., p.42-44.
[iii] V. R. Narla. *Geeta, Haqiqat ke Aine Mai* (translated by Syed Shahid), Universal Peace Foundation, New Delhi,

2003, pp.137-165.
[iv] R.S. Sharma, 'Firqawarana Tarikh Aur Ram ki Ayodhya', in *Khuda Bakhsh Library Journal* (96), December 1994, p.137.
[v] S.L.Sagar, *Daktar Ambedkar Bauddh Kyo Baney*, Sagar Prakashan, Mainpuri, p.150.
[vi] Quoted in Salahuddin Usman, *RSS: Talimat wa Maqasid*, Nizami Offset Press, Lucknow, 1993, pp.205-06.

Part 5: The Origin and Spread of Islam in India

At a time when in India, as in many other parts of the world, social hierarchy, inequality and oppression were at their peak, with a large section of humanity, such as the Indian Shudras, being treated as worse than animals in the name of religion, the Prophet Muhammad began his mission in Arabia. The core of his message was the oneness of God. ‘Say: "He is Allah, [the] One’, the Quran exhorts the Prophet to announce to the world. Another central aspect of the divine message the Prophet was commissioned to preach was the oneness and ontological equality of all human beings. Thus, the Quran declares, ‘O mankind! We created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other [not that you may despise each other]. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is [he who is] the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things]’ (49: 13). The Prophet very explicitly announced, ‘An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor has a non-Arab any superiority over an Arab. Nor has a black man any superiority over a white man or a white man over a black man except by the criterion of God consciousness (*taqwa*). All of you are from Adam, and Adam is from dust.’ This message of social equality is a central pillar of the Islamic *dawah* or missionary call. It was, undoubtedly, one of the major factors for the powerful attraction that Islam exercised and for its rapid spread, in a matter of just a few years, across the Arabian peninsula and beyond.

The first Muslim converts in India were a result of the influence of Arab traders. This dates back to before the first Muslim conquests of the region. These and consequent conversions must be seen in the light of the fact that by this time Brahminism had succeeded in completely extirpating Buddhism from India and in bringing back the Shudras into the Hindu fold as slaves, subjecting them to horrendously cruel forms of oppression. It is a well-known fact that the Arab traders, Sufis and some Muslim conquerors embraced the oppressed Shudras. Many of them kept Shudras in their

employ. In many cases, as has been documented for Malabar, they took charge of the children of impoverished Shudras, and reared them as Muslims, showering on them love and care. Many Shudras, particularly the Untouchables, were overwhelmed with this behaviour of the early Muslims, which was a reflection of Islamic teachings. Consequently, they began converting to Islam in droves. After becoming Muslim they were often treated by the Hindus as of equal status as the other Muslims, certainly above that of the unconverted Shudras. This further promoted conversions to Islam among the Shudras. Immigrant Muslims did not hesitate to marry their women, and this helped further improve their social standing. The Mapilla, Labbai and Navayat Muslims of south India are products of such unions.
In addition to the oppressed castes, people from other castes also converted to Islam, often as a result of even minor infractions of the rules of caste, which resulted in their immediately being expelled from their castes. The process of the spread of Islam in India was greatly facilitated by the role of pious Sufis, 'friends of God' (*awliya-e Allah*), whose message of love, fraternity, and equality exercised a powerful influence on vast numbers of Indians, particularly from the oppressed castes, attracting them to Islam.

Conversion to Islam among the Shudras was thus, to a large extent, due to social factors, especially the appeal of egalitarianism that is so central to Islam. As the noted Indian Muslim historian Shaikh Muhammad Ikram writes in his *Ab-e Kausar*:

'An additional, and very important, factor for the spread of Islam in India were Islamic teachings about social equality, which held out a call for freedom and progress for the low castes [...] If a list is drawn of low caste people who, after embracing Islam, rose to be appointed as generals in the armies [of Muslim rulers] and governors of provinces [under Muslim rule] [...] one will realise the importance of this central factor in the spread of Islam [in India].'[i]

The same point is made by T.W. Arnold in his acclaimed book 'The Preaching of Islam', where he asserts with respect to Bengal that:

'To these poor people—fishermen, hunters, pirates, and low-caste tillers of the soil, Islam came as a revelation from on high. It was the creed of the ruling race. Its missionaries were men of zeal who brought the Gospel of the unity of God and the equality of men in its sight to a despised and neglected population [...] It brought in a higher conception of God and a nobler idea of the brotherhood of man. It offered to the teeming low castes of Bengal, who had sat for ages abject on the outermost pale of the Hindu community, a free entrance into a new social organisation [...] It is this absence of class prejudices which constitutes the real strength of Islam in India and enables it to win so many converts from Hinduism.'[ii]

[i] Shaikh Muhammad Ikram, *Ab-e Kausar*, Idara-e Saqafat-e Islamia, Lahore, 1964, p.385.
[ii] T.W.Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, Adam Publishers and Distributors, Delhi, 1997, pp.279-91.

Part 6: In the Period of 'Muslim Rule'

Caste Struggle
By Masood Alam Falahi

With its philosophy of human equality Islam would have rapidly spread across India but this was not to be tolerated by the upholders of Brahminism or Manuvad. With the conversion of vast numbers of oppressed caste people to Islam they saw their hegemony, built on the caste system and untouchability, rapidly crumbling. They realised that if they did not modify Hinduism and if they did not halt the spread of Islam, Hinduism would be destroyed forever. Accordingly, they adopted many different strategies to counter the Islamic wave.

Division of Muslims into 'High' and 'Low'

Because political power over most of India was now in the hands of Muslims, the Brahminists could not quash them in the same way as they had earlier destroyed the Buddhists and the Jains—by physically exterminating them on a massive scale. Instead, they tried every means to prevent the further expansion of Islam. To take revenge on the Muslims for their political defeat and for attracting vast numbers of Shudras to the Muslim fold, the Brahmins spared no effort to promote hatred against the Muslims and their faith. In this way they tried to dissuade the Shudras and others from converting to Islam. They branded the Muslims as despicable Mlecchas, and treated them as 'impure' and 'polluted', a tendency that continues even today in large parts of India. This is why, leaving aside the Dalits, even 'low' caste Hindus refused to consume food or water touched by Muslims or to draw water from wells used by Muslims. If a Muslim touched a Hindu's water pot, he would break it, considering it to have been rendered impure. If a Muslim touched a Hindu, he would consider himself polluted and would have to take a ritual bath to 'cleanse' himself.

Such practices have not completely died out even today. Even now the Brahminists have not relented in fomenting hatred against Muslims and Islam, carrying on in the path of their forefathers. This is precisely the same policy that they

adopted in order to extirpate Buddhism from India. However, they did not entirely succeed in their mission, and, despite aggressively promoting hatred and prejudice against the Muslims, many oppressed caste people continued to embrace Islam over the centuries in search of liberation and to free themselves from the horrors of Brahminism.

At the same time, however, the egalitarian project of Islam came to be sabotaged from within, with the emergence of a parallel caste system among the Muslims themselves. Over time, it grew into such a strong and pervasive force that it made a complete mockery of Islam's insistence on the brotherhood and fundamental equality of all believers. This was particularly noticeable in those parts of India where the carriers of Islam were not Arabs, in particular in regions where ruling Muslim dynasties were non-Arab or Ajami, and that were, unlike the early Arab Muslims, not committed to the equality of all Muslims. Despite being Muslims, they had not rid themselves of ethnic pride and notions of social hierarchy. To some extent, caste divisions and prejudices among the Muslims of the country were also a result of the lingering caste consciousness among 'upper' caste Hindus who had converted to Islam for various reasons. The impact of the wider Hindu caste-ridden society on the Indian Muslims, both converts as well as those of foreign origin, and its role in fomenting caste divisions and consciousness among them cannot also be discounted.

Gradually, then, the ruling Muslim elites of foreign Ajami extraction came to uphold and champion caste-based social hierarchy, appearing, in this regard, no different from their Hindu counterparts, and in complete contrast to the early Arab Muslims. So caste-ridden did Indian Muslim society become that in the period of 'Muslim' rule in India it was almost impossible to distinguish between Hindu and Muslim oppressed castes. The oppressed Muslim castes had converted to Islam to escape Brahminical oppression, but the Muslim rulers, instead of assisting them in any way, branded them as

'low-born' and subjected them to various forms of degradation. They even devised a four-fold caste system almost identical to that of the four-fold *varna* order of the Brahminical Hindus. Accordingly, the four ethnic groups that claimed foreign—Arab, West Asian and Central Asian—descent, the Syeds, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans, came to be considered as *ashraf/sharif* or 'noble'. Converts from the 'high' caste Hindus were also considered as *sharif*. On the other hand, impoverished Muslims of indigenous origin, converts from the oppressed castes, who came to form the vast majority of the Indian Muslim population, were branded as *ajlaf* or 'low' or even as *arzal/razil* or 'despicable'.

Arab rule in India was short-lived and confined to just a small part of the country, limited mainly to Sindh and some parts of southern Punjab. A series of Turkish military raids into northern India followed the collapse of Arab rule, which were led by military commanders such as Sultan Nasiruddin Sabuktagin, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi and Sultan Shihabuddin Ghori, and which carried on till the early thirteenth century. These commanders did not establish their rule in India, though. The foundation of full-fledged 'Muslim' rule in the country was laid by Sultan Qutbuddin Aibak in 1206, when he became Sultan of Delhi. Till his time, caste divisions and prejudices were not as acute among the then fledgling Muslim community in India as they were to later become. This is indicated by the fact that Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, Sultan Shihabuddin Ghori and Sultan Qutbuddin Aibak appointed their slaves as their successors and governors of their provinces. Mahmud Ghaznavi appointed his slave Ayaz as governor of Punjab. He bestowed the title of 'Raja' on a Hindu from the 'low' Hajjam or barber caste named Tilak and made him the commander of his army. Shihabuddin Ghori appointed his slave Qutbuddin Aibak as governor of all his Indian provinces, who, in turn, appointed his slave Shamsuddin Iltutmish as ruler of Bulandshahr, and then administrator of Badaun, after which he freed him and gave him his daughter in marriage.

The Case of Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish

It is from the reign of Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish (d. 1236) onwards that we get much evidence of caste-based discrimination against 'low' caste Muslims being actively enforced by the state. Shamelessly ignoring Islamic teachings that stress social equality, numerous Muslim Sultans very explicitly supported caste-based divisions and discrimination. They appointed only so-called *ashraf*Muslims (as well as 'upper' caste Hindus) to top posts, while strictly excluding so-called 'low' caste Muslims (and, of course, 'low' caste non-Muslims, too). A good illustration of this is provided in Ziauddin Barani's *Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi*, which relates that in the reign of both Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish (d.1236) and Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (d. 1287), who belonged to the Slave Dynasty, 'low' caste Muslims were forbidden from all senior government posts. Moreover, if a 'low' caste person was found to be occupying any such post he was immediately dismissed. These two Sultans had once themselves been slaves, and not just that—they had been slaves of slaves. Sultan Iltutmish was the slave of Sultan Qutbuddin Aibak, who was the slave of Sultan Muhammad Ghori. Balban was the slave of Iltutmish. Yet, despite this, they acted in this way. Why this was so is a question that needs detailed research. The *Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi* further relates that once, a senior courtier of Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish, Nizam ul-Mulk Junaidi, presented a man called Jamal Marzuq before the Emperor for the post of overseer of Qannauj. Just as Jamal Marzuq placed his lips on the Emperor's feet, the vizier Khwaja Aziz Bin Bahruz recited the following couplet:

Do not give a pen in the hand of the low-born
Because the low-born might dare to make the black stone which is in the Kaaba a stone for purification after urination.

This couplet was a cruel barb directed at Jamal Marzuq. The Sultan at once understood what the vizier's intention was—to indicate to him that Jamal Marzuq was from a 'low' caste.

Accordingly, the Sultan inquired from Nizam ul-Mulk about Jamal Marzuq's caste background, and was told that he was indeed from a 'low' caste. Nizam ul-Mulk tried to defend his bringing Jamal Marzuq before the Sultan by claiming that the latter had a fine handwriting. However, this defence did not placate the enraged Sultan, who was livid that Nizam ul-Mulk had dared to even suggest that he appoint a 'low' caste person to a senior post. Thereupon, he ordered that an investigation be made into the caste background of every person employed at various levels in his administration and in all the cities of his realm. This search revealed the names of 33 'low' caste people. The list of these was presented before the Sultan, who dismissed them at once.

Shortly after this incident, two nobles, Malik Azizuddin Salar and Malik Qutbuddin Hasan Ghori, appeared before the Sultan and said to him that since he had investigated the caste background of so many government officials, it was advisable for him to find out what caste his courtier Nizam ul-Mulk belonged to. This was because, they said, if he were truly from a 'good' caste, he would never have suggested that a person from a 'low' caste be appointed to any post, no matter how menial—which is what he had done. Accordingly, the caste background of the vizier was investigated, whereupon it was discovered that his grand-father had been a Julaha.[i] He was immediately dismissed from service.[ii]

Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban

It is related that once Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban ordered his courtiers to search for a capable and experienced man from a 'good' family for the post of overseer of Amroha. Thereupon, Malik Alauddin Kashli Khan, Amir Hajib, and Malik Nizamuddin Bazghana selected a certain Kamal Mahyar as a candidate for the post. When Kamal Mahyar was kissing the ground before the Emperor's feet, the Emperor ordered his courtiers to ask him what the word 'Mahyar' meant. The man answered that this was the name of his father, who had been

a Hindu slave. On hearing this the Emperor rage knew no bounds. He berated the men who had brought Kamal Mahyar before him for committing what he regarded as the grievous office of suggesting that he employ a 'low' caste son of a slave, even though he was capable and well educated. Then, addressing two of his close courtiers, Adil Khan and Timar Khan, he said, 'I know that God has blessed me with one characteristic, and that is that I simply cannot tolerate a low-born *razil* occupying any respectable position, and whenever I see such people my blood begins to boil. I cannot employ the son of a low-born or incapable person in the administration of my kingdom, which has been given to me by God. I cannot grant him any service or land grant.' He warned his courtiers that if henceforth anyone recommended to him a 'low-born' person, no matter how capable, for a job or post, he would teach him a 'brutal lesson'. And so as long as Balban lived no one dared suggest to him to employ a 'low-born' person to any post.[iii]

Following in the path of Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish, Balban ordered that the caste of every person in the royal services be investigated. As the noted historian Khaliq Ahmad Nizami writes in his highly-acclaimed study, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*:

'[...] Balban made very thorough enquiries about the families of all his officers and government servants. Expert genealogists had assembled in Delhi from all parts of the country to help him in determining the family status of the persons.'[iv]

It would not be an exaggeration to say that in the eyes of these Sultans who were fanatically wedded to caste discrimination the status of poor, oppressed Muslims and Hindus was worse than that of animals. The latter could never dare to come close to the royal court. The vast majority of Indian Muslim (and, of course, Hindu) rulers and nobles or *umara* were extremely caste conscious. In a few exceptional cases, some Indian Muslim rulers dared to appoint 'low' caste

people to important posts, but this was considered to be so threatening by the well-entrenched elites that such a step sometimes even occasioned bloody revolts and plots to dethrone such rulers, who were seen as deviants. Thus, when Sultan Iltutmish's very capable daughter and successor, the intrepid Razia Sultana (d. 1240), appointed Jamaluddin Yaqut, a slave of Abysinnian origin, to the very senior post of *amir al-umara*, a number of Turk and Afghan nobles rose up in revolt, angered at a mere slave being raised to such a high status. In the course of their rebellion, Yaqut was slain, Razia was toppled and thrown into jail, and Iltutmish's son Muizuddin Behram was appointed to the throne of Delhi in her place. Later, Muizuddin Behram ordered the killing of Razia and her husband.[v]

Sultan Qutbuddin Mubarak Shah Khilji (d. 1321) bestowed the title of *wafa ul-mulk* on a slave named Shaheen and appointed him as his deputy when he was leaving Delhi for Deogir. After he conquered Deogir, he appointed a recent convert to Islam named Khusrau Khan, who was from a 'low' caste Chamar family from Gujarat, as governor of Deogir and entrusted him with the entire Deccan, including with the task of overseeing all the local Rajas and extracting tribute from them. He also appointed Khusrau Khan's brother as the governor of Gujarat. This patronage of the 'low-born' greatly incensed the nobles of the Sultan's court, who were mostly Muslims. Some of them plotted to assassinate the Sultan while he was on his way back to Delhi from Deogir and appoint Alauddin Khilji's cousin Malik Asaduddin as Emperor in his place. When the Sultan learned of this conspiracy, he arranged for Malik Asaduddin and some of his associates to be killed.[vi]

Discrimination Against Muslims From the Oppressed Castes

The so-called *ajlaf* and *arzal* formed the fifth and 'lowest' category in the Indian Muslim social hierarchy, paralleling the Untouchables in the Hindu case, who were ranked below

the four *varnas*. They were subjected to various forms of cruel oppression by the dominant, so-called 'high' castes, both Hindu as well as Muslim. Even 'upper' caste Muslims would generally refuse to visit or eat in their homes. They were generally forbidden from acquiring education, setting up educational institutions, constructing proper houses, keeping respectable-sounding and proper Islamic names and even, in some cases, cooking what was considered to be lavish food because if they did so the 'upper' castes would regard them as daring to compete with them.

Many examples of this can be cited. Chronicling the reformist efforts in the Saharanpur district in present-day Uttar Pradesh of the noted early nineteenth century Islamic scholar and activist Syed Ahmad Shahid, Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi comments:

'In the Daud Sara locality in Saharanpur there lived some families of Noorbafs (Julahas or Ansaris). They, too, desired to give the oath of allegiance (*bai'at*) at the hands of Syed Ahmad Shahid. Members of the caste consulted among themselves and sent to leaders to him and requested him to visit their humble homes. He accepted their invitation. They also invited other respected and noble people (*shurafa*) of the town. The nobles of the town were ashamed to accept the invitation of this caste and visit their homes. When they learned that he [Syed Ahmad] had visited the Noorbafs' locality and had accepted their hospitality, they reluctantly did the same, although in their hearts they did not like his going there. All the members of this [Noorbaf] caste gave the oath of allegiance [at the hands of Syed Ahmad Shahid] and presented him with gifts.'[vii]

Continuing with his account of Syed Ahmad Shahid's campaign against caste
discrimination among the Muslims of his times, Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi relates that one day Syed Ahmad conferred with two of his close followers, lamenting that 'ignorance'

(*jahalat*) had taken such deep roots among the Muslims of Saharanpur that he feared it might gravely threaten their faith in, and adherence to, Islam. In this regard, he noted with much regret, that poor Muslims did not keep names for their children that were used by the Muslim nobility and that they did not cook the sort of food that rich Muslims did for fear that the latter might think that they were trying to compete with them.[viii]

This practice of forbidding 'low' caste Muslims from eating what was considered 'high class' food associated with the so-called *ashraf* remained quite widespread at least in some parts of India. Some years ago, an office-bearer of the Jamaat-e Islami Hind, Javed Iqbal, who belongs to the Shamsi Shaikh community, told me of a shocking incident that took place in his village of Nagina, in Bijnore district in present-day Uttar Pradesh, just a few years before India's independence. An Ansari family in the village was celebrating a wedding, and *pilau* and *biryani* had been cooked for their guests. When some Syeds and Shaikhs of the village heard of this, they rushed to the Ansari's house, overturned the cauldrons in which the food had been cooked, and said to the family, 'You are Julahas, and yet you have the gumption to compete with us! You must not cook *pilau* and *biryani*. Instead, cook *khichadi* and plain boiled rice.'

Another acquaintance of mine, Dr. Maulana Ashhad Rafiq Nadvi, who belongs to the Shaikh caste and is a lecturer of Arabic at a school attached to the Aligarh Muslim University, narrated to me an incident about a close friend of his from the Ansari caste from a village in Azamgarh district in Uttar Pradesh. This was at the time before the abolition of feudal landholdings or *zamindari* in the area. His friend's family decided to build a permanent or *pakka* house, and for this purpose had ordered bricks and other construction materials. When some members of the Shaikh caste and the*zamindar*s of the village heard of this, they refused to let them build the house simply because, as they put it, they were 'Julahas'.

Today, the sons of the very same *zamindar*s who forbade them from constructing a proper house now work as servants of these Ansaris.

Throughout the period of so-called 'Muslim' rule in India, the 'low' Muslims, as I mentioned earlier, were subjected to various forms of disabilities and degradation by the self-styled *ashraf* Muslims. To call someone a *Julaha*, a *Nai* or a *Kanjar*, names of so-called 'low' Muslim (and non-Muslim) castes, was a form of terrible abuse. The Syeds, who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, were considered to be of the highest social standing. In promoting the Syeds to this stature Shi'ism and pro-Shia trends played a critical role, since in the Shia faith Syeds are given a very exalted status. In the wake of the devastating Mongol attacks on Central and West Asia in the thirteenth century, a large number of Syeds fled to India for safety, where they were welcomed by the then Muslim Sultans. Already, stories had been spread about the supposed or alleged superiority of the Syeds, and so when they began to arrive in such large numbers in India the ignorant Muslim populace developed an even greater reverence for them than before. They began attributing all sorts of noble qualities and even miraculous powers to them, considering them as the epitome of bravery and piety, as deserving all sorts of privileges, and as possessing all sorts of virtues and qualities, even knowledge of the unseen. Even the most tyrannical of Muslim Sultans considered it a matter of pride to bow their heads before the Syeds, and offered them the highest posts in their realms. Thus, all the Sultans of India, particularly Alauddin Khilji and Firoze Shah Tughlaq, went out of their way to court the Syeds. They lavishly patronised them by appointing them to very senior and lucrative positions. In this way, they replicated the longstanding policy of Hindu rulers in their pathetic appeasement of Brahmins, whom they regarded as *bhu devta*s or 'gods on earth'.

In 1398, in the wake of Timur's devastating invasion of India,

the Syeds managed to grab the throne of Delhi and ruled from there for a short while. However, soon enough, they proved incompetent, and their last ruler was forced to relinquish the throne and retire to Budaun, in what is today western Uttar Pradesh. However, despite the collapse of the Syed dynasty, the social prestige and influence of the Syeds continued undiminished and successive Muslim rulers continued to court them.

One can provide numerous instance of the exaggerated and unwarranted reverence shown to the Syeds by Muslim Sultans of India that clearly parallels the slavishness of Hindu kings before the Brahmins. For example, it is reported that a Syed from the town of Koyil was accused of misappropriating money from the royal treasury, and there was very strong evidence of his having done so. The case was brought before the then Sultan of Delhi, Sikander Lodi (d.1517), who not only dismissed the case but also allowed the Syed to keep the money that he had purloined.[ix] Likewise, it is reported that Timur (d.1405), who was inclined towards Shi'ism, held the Syeds in great reverence. The noted historian Kunwar Muhammad Ashraf observes that in the course of his bloody invasion of India, Timur deliberately spared the lives of Syeds whom he came across, while he indiscriminately massacred all other people in the most barbaric manner. Ashraf writes:

'It is narrated, in all seriousness, in texts such as *Malfuzat-e Timuri*, that when Abdullah, ruler of Transoxiana, delayed in offering prayers for Timur's departed soul because he considered Timur to have been irreligious and cruel and his hands red with the blood of innocents, the Prophet of God himself indicated to him in a dream that his doubts were baseless because while, on the one hand, he [Timur] had shed the blood of men in order to serve God, on the other hand, he had also protected the lives of Syeds.'[x]

It is simply amazing, and, at the same time, deeply troubling how such completely bogus stories were concocted simply to

assert the claim of the supposed superiority of the Syeds, stories that denigrated the Prophet himself and made it wrongly appear as if he was concerned only about the Syeds and that other Muslims did not matter to him at all. Needless to say, this suggestion is completely against the teachings of the Prophet. The fate of those who fabricated such utterly false stories is indicated in a *hadith* report contained in the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, according to which the Prophet declared that those who deliberately attributed a falsehood to him would be destined to hell.

Many other Muslim rulers were no less committed than Timur to honouring the Syeds, deeming them to be a class apart from the rest of society. The medieval historian Abdul Qadir Badauni writes in his *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* of a certain Muhammad Shah who arrived in India in the reign of Sher Shah Suri (d.1552). He called himself a Syed, although many people doubted his ancestry. He adopted the dress and manners of a Sufi Shaikh. Although he was actually an imposter, Sher Shah believed him to be an accomplished saint. Prince, Salim Shah, Sher Shah's son, was also a great devotee of his and would often visit him for omens about his succeeding to the throne. In such reverence did he hold him that he would carry the man's shoes with his own hands. The story is told of how, one day, someone sent a basket of melons for Muhammad Shah. By chance, Salim Shah arrived there just then. Muhammad Shah ordered him thus, 'I am giving you this basket as an indication of your kingdom. Get up and put it on your head and walk on.' Salim Shah unhesitatingly lifted the basket onto his head, taking it to be a auspicious omen.[xi]

The Mughal Emperor Jalaluddin Akbar (d. 1605) also held the Syeds in special regard. He considered them worthy of particular respect, and exempted them from capital punishment. Soon after Akbar ascended the Mughal throne, at the tender age of thirteen, writes the Mughal historian Muhammad Qasim Farishta, a Syed nobleman revolted

against him. He was arrested and Bairam Khan, Akbar's guardian, suggested he be killed. However, Akbar did not agree because he did not approve of a son of a Syed (*syed zadah*) being given capital punishment.[xii]
One could provide many more such instances, but by now the point should be amply clear that just as the Brahmins were accorded an exalted status among the Hindus, the Syeds, followed by other so-called *sharif* castes, came to be regarded as superior to all the other Muslims. This form of extreme social hierarchy remained in place throughout the period of so-called Muslim rule in India, and was rigidly enforced by most Muslim rulers.

Is It Right to Consider the Syeds as Descendants of the Prophet Muhammad?
It is inappropriate, in the light of the Quran and the Sunnah, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, to consider the Syeds as being lineal descendants (*aulad*) of the Prophet because Muslim jurists are unanimous in stressing that in Islam descent is passed down through male, not female, offspring. Thus, the Quran says, 'Call them by (the names of) their fathers' (33:5). In other words, for social purposes it is descent through one's father that is recognised, not through one's mother. This practice is not limited to this world alone. Rather, as al-Bukhari mentions, quoting a narration in his*Sahih*, on the Day of Judgment one will be called by one's father's name. This is why the *ulema* have laid down that in settling a person's *nasb* or lineage his relation with his father will be the decisive factor. He will inherit the *nasb* of his father, and not of his mother.

Given the near consensus among the *ulema* that one inherits one's *nasb* from one's father, not one's mother, and that a man's lineage is carried down through his son, and not his daughter, it is clearly not correct to consider the Syeds as lineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or for the Syeds to make such a claim. This claim contradicts both the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet. The Prophet did not have any

sons who outlived him or who carried on his lineage. That is why his lineage did not continue, and it is incorrect to claim that it did so through his daughter Fatima. As the Quran clearly says, 'Muhammad is not the father of any of your men' (33: 40). The fact of the matter is that it was the Shias who developed the theory of Fatima's children and their descendants being lineal descendants of the Prophet because their political interests were closely tied up with this theory. On this basis they claimed the right to rule, a claim that was further backed by the Abbasids. The Abbasids opposed the Ummayads by claiming to champion the right to rule of the Syeds, whom they presented as descendants of the Prophet.

Hindu and Muslim Casteism

If the matter is studied dispassionately, it will be readily apparent that there was in this period of Indian history very little difference in the nature of caste discrimination and prejudice among Indian Muslims and Hindus. The differences in the two cases were only in matters of some details. Accordingly, writing of early twentieth century north Indian Muslim society, Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf noted that the Indian Muslims were completely caste-ridden, and that in this respect they were almost identical to the Hindus. 'In both cases', he commented, 'people of foreign extraction claim to be of superior social status. The status that Aryans enjoy among the Hindus parallels that of Muslims of Arab, Iranian, Afghan and Mughal descent among the Indian Muslims.' He noted that, 'Just as upper caste Hindu men can marry low caste women but disallow for the reverse sort of marriage, in the same way among upper caste Muslims, a Syed man can marry a Shaikh woman but will never give his own daughter in hand to a Shaikh man. Marriage between upper caste Muslims of foreign descent with indigenous Indian Muslims is frowned upon.'[xiii]

It would not be wrong, therefore, to argue that the Muslims who claimed foreign and, therefore, 'noble' descent, had, with

some exceptions, nothing but contempt and scorn for the indigenous Muslims of oppressed caste background.

[i] Ziauddin Barani, *Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi* (Translated by Syed Moin ul-Haq), Urdu Science Board, Lahore, 1983, pp.90-92

[ii] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*, Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Dilli, Delhi, 1974, p.107.

[iii] Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi, op.cit., pp. 79-92.

[iv] Nizami, op.cit., p.107.

[v] Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, *Aina-e Haqiqat Numa*, p. 348-49.

[vi] Ibid., pp. 409-10.

[vii] Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Sirat-e Syed Ahmad Shahid* (vol. 5), Majlis-e-Tahqiqat wa Nashriyat-e Islam, Lucknow, 1990, pp.165-66.

[viii] Ibid., pp.167-68.

[ix] Quoted in Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf, *Hindustani Ma'ashra Ahe-e Wusta Mai* (vol.1) (Translated by Qamruddin), National Book Trust, New Delhi, pp.138-39.

[x] Ibid., pp.139-40.

[xi] Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (Translated by Ehteshamuddin), Munshi Nawal Kihore Press, Lucknow, 1889, pp.163-64.

[xii] Muhammad Qasim Farishta, *Tarikh-e Farishta* (Translated by Abdul Haye Khwaja), Matkaba-e Deoband, Deoband, 1983, p.680.

[xiii] Ashraf, op.cit, pp. 148-49.

Part 7: The Role of the Medieval Ulema

Following the end of the short-lived Arab rule in western India, the Muslim dynasties that followed and ruled vast parts of India for some five hundred years all strictly upheld and enforced the Brahminical law of caste. In this entire period, the overall conditions of the oppressed castes who had converted to Islam remained pathetic. Because of this, the pace of conversion of the oppressed Shudras to Islam slowed down considerably. For many 'low' caste people who witnessed the Muslim rulers so passionately upholding caste divisions and discriminations, conversion to Islam no longer appeared as a means for social liberation. They saw no difference in their oppression and degradation under the Brahmins and that of 'low' caste Muslim converts. In this way, the caste-conscious Muslim rulers proved to be a great stumbling block in the further spread of Islam in India.

The reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq (d. 1351), who ascended the throne of Delhi in 1325, was somewhat different in this regard. He is said to have been a pious Muslim, an Islamic scholar in his own right. He was, so it is said, very regular in his prayers and had even memorised the entire Quran. At first, like most Muslim rulers of Delhi before him, he appointed large numbers of 'high' caste Muslims, especially those of foreign birth or descent, to top posts and bestowed on them vast estates and land grants. At this stage, he ignored the needs and interests of his own indigenous Indian subjects, Muslims as well as Hindus. However, later in his reign the Sultan developed sharp differences, to the point of enmity, with many of the foreign so-called *ashraf* elites whom he had earlier so lavishly patronised. The reason for this, as Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf writes, was that these foreigners had come to India simply to feather their own nests, to acquire as much wealth as they could and then quickly return to their countries. Therefore, their loyalty to the Sultan was always doubtful. Many of them were not interested in posts that would require them to stay on in India for what they considered was an excessively long period. Even those few who chose to settle down in India were

motivated only by the desire for personal aggrandisement, not for promoting the prosperity of the country or for improving the functioning of the state's administrative apparatus.[i]

It is likely that the transformation in Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq's attitude and policies towards the foreign so-called *ashraf* was also influenced by his personal piety, which might have made him unwilling to accept patently un-Islamic customs, practices and beliefs widespread among many so-called *ashraf*, such as those related to caste. His commitment to Islam is evident, for instance, from his patronising of pious*ulema*, his reverence for genuine Sufis, and for his opposition to wrongful and un-Islamic innovations or *biddat*. This is said to have won him the opposition of many 'worldly' mullahs and fake Sufis, who thrived on promoting a wide range of un-Islamic beliefs and practices.
With a noticeable shift in the Sultan's policies towards the so-called *ashraf* nobility, a number of revolts broke out in different parts of his kingdom, spearheaded by disgruntled so-called *ashraf*, which were supported by corrupt mullahs and Syeds and fake Sufis, who, too, were from the so-called*ashraf* class. This further reinforced the Sultan's opposition to the so-called*ashraf*, and he crushed their revolts with severity. Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf explains:

'Following this, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq lost all faith in the foreigners and was forced to reconsider his policies. He now had no expectations from foreigners or people of foreign extraction. [...] He had experienced the foreign Muslims, and they had proved a failure as far as the kingdom was concerned. Now, only one alternative remained—and that was to try the local, Indian people themselves, irrespective of religion and race. That is why towards the end of his reign he adopted a very democratic approach in administrative matters.'[ii]
In accordance with this new policy, the Sultan took the bold step of confiscating all the land grants and other privileges of the foreign self-styled*shurafa*, including *ulema* and so-called

Sufis, who had led or participated in revolts against him. These men were staunch supporters of the thoroughly un-Islamic institutions of caste and *ashraf* hegemony. The Sultan went even further and appointed a large number of Muslims from indigenous oppressed caste backgrounds to very senior positions in the civil service and the army. He bestowed the title of *qawwam al-mulk* on Kannu, a Hindu servant of Rudradev, ruler of Telengana, who had converted to Islam, and appointed him governor of Multan. Later, he gave him the exalted title of*khan-e jahan* and made him deputy ruler of Gujarat. He granted the title of*aziz ul-mulk* to Azizuddin, a recent convert to Islam from the 'low' status Kalal caste, and appointed him governor of Dhar.[iii] He appointed an indigenous Indian Muslim, Nusrat Khan, also known as Shihabuddin Sultani, as governor of Bidar.[iv] Yet another 'new Muslim' (*nau musalman*), from the Baqqal (also known as Rain or Kunjara) caste of vegetable sellers was named governor of Zaffarabad and Awadh. One can cite many more such instances of the Sultan's policy of patronising Muslims of Indian origin, converts from among the Indian people, most of who were of oppressed caste origin. In this way the Sultan exemplified the Islamic commitment to social equality, which had been eclipsed by earlier Sultans who were firmly committed to the hegemony of the so-called *ashraf* and to the subordination and degradation of the oppressed castes. It is likely that the Sultan's favourable policies with regard to the *nau musalman* also helped in the spread of Islam among the oppressed Shudras.

It appears that, like many other so-called *ashraf*, a sizeable number of fake Sufis and *ulema* of foreign descent associated with the royal court were incensed with the Sultan's changed policies *vis-a-vis* the *ashraf*, on the one hand, and the indigenous, oppressed caste Muslims, on the other. They were of the firm belief that the latter had no place in the court at all, and were always on the lookout for ways to expel them from there. This section of Muslim religious professionals had lost all commitment to Islam, their major concern being to

curry favour with the rulers so that they could gain power and accumulate wealth. So greedy and hungry for worldly pleasures were they that they showed no hesitation in deliberately misinterpreting the Quran and the Hadith to please the rulers. As Amir Khusrau, a noted disciple of the famous Chishti Sufi Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya, and a contemporary of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, remarked: 'The respect for the *ulema* in society is purely formal and ritualistic [...] If one's respect and standing in society is determined by one's qualities, then without any fear of contradiction it can be safely said that ordinary people are a thousand times better than the *ulema* class [...] The Qazis are totally ignorant of Islamic laws and simply incapable and unfit for any responsible post in the government. They have no knowledge and no sort of skill or capacity. Whenever a tyrannical Sultan ascends the throne, they assist him. In their own personal lives they openly act against religious rules.'[v]

Ziauddin Barani: A Casteist Mullah and His Anti-Islamic Ways

Ziauddin Barani, a Syed, was one of the noted historians of the period under discussion. He was the author of the *Fatawa-e Jahandari* and the *Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi*, both of which he wrote in order to flatter the rulers of his time. He himself admitted that, together with other *ulema*, he sought to flatter the Sultan and pander to his desires, and that in order to enrich himself he deliberately interpreted the Quran incorrectly and quoted traditions of doubtful authenticity. Repenting in his later life for his sins, Barani very candidly admitted:
'We who deny the favours of God, who had read a bit and acquired some knowledge, which is a means for respect and honour, became victims of hypocrisy out of greed for worldly pelf. We were among those close to the Sultan but we did not speak the truth in front of him on the matter of inflicting punishments that are against the *shariah*. Fearing our life, which is sure to go one day, and scared of losing our wealth,

which is one day bound to finish, we were scared of him and regarded it convenient not to speak the truth before him and remain silent on the matter of punishments that violate the *shariah*. In the greed to acquire his closeness and an exalted status, we agreed with him and assisted him in acting against the laws of the faith and recited narrations of dubious authenticity in front of him. I do not know if others also behaved in the same way as I did. As a result of what I did and said, now, in my old age, I have become debased, stricken with calamities and without any helper, dependent on others, and stripped of honour. This is my state in this world. I have no idea what my condition will be in the life to come and what all punishments I will have to suffer.'[vi]

Both of Barani's books are replete with scurrilous abuses against oppressed caste people who embraced Islam on their own volition. Barani describes them as 'despicable', 'mean' and 'low-born', and contrasts them with his own Syed family, which he praises as 'high-born', 'extremely respectable', and as 'revered by the entire world'. He boasts that they were 'so highly knowledgeable, God-fearing and pious that their qualities are beyond description'. He even claims that members of his family were able to perform miracles (*karamat*).[vii]
Barani was a staunch defender of the caste system, for which he wrongly sought to provide Islamic legitimacy. Thus, he argued:

'From the very beginning of Time itself, positive and negative characteristics have been distributed among, and allotted to, human beings. The actions and thoughts of human beings are determined by the commandment of God. When the All-Powerful God produces some good or bad in a human being, He gives him the capacity needed to express that particular good or bad quality. This capacity is hereditary, and because goodness is given to those who adopt good professions, they have been called as of high status, free-born, pious, religious, and of superior lineage. Only such people and groups deserve

posts and positions in the government of the Muslims. No benefit can be had in this world through helping the despicable and low-born progress. Because to act against the will of the Creator of the Universe is to have no care for the future, one should not be deceived by the low-born, for their merits are false, not genuine.'

To justify the wholly un-Islamic notion of caste and ethnic superiority in the face of Islamic teachings to the contrary, Barani did not hesitate to distort clear Quranic commandments about human equality. Thus, for instance, he linked the Quranic verse 'Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you' (49: 13) with the so-called*ashraf* and contended:

'Sacredness is the right of the *ashraf*. Hence, if any person is pious it must certainly be that he has *ashraf* elements in his ancestry. But if it is proven that he is low-born then his holiness is only show. If in the eyes of God Qasais, Julahas and the sons of shopkeepers have greater respect, it is truly a matter of shame.'

Further, he says:

'Sultans, Sufis and Sufi *shaikhs* are superior to everyone else, and their status is equal to that of the prophets. The high-born advisors of the Sultans can understand those secrets that God has kept concealed in the Hidden Tablet (lauh-e mahfuz).'

Barani insisted that rulers must not provide any opportunity for the oppressed castes to advance, claiming that this was against the Divine will. He advised rulers to forbid the 'low' castes from acquiring knowledge thus:

'The ruler must keep low-born Muslims away from education. If anyone dares to give them education he must be punished. And not just that, such a person must be sent into exile.'

It was not only in denying the oppressed caste Muslims knowledge and education that Barani echoed the Brahmin Manu. Like Manu and other Brahmin defenders of the caste system, Barani also insisted that every person must adopt the occupation of his father, that is to say his hereditary caste

occupation. Thus, he laid down:

'Every person must be compelled to follow the occupation of his ancestors.'[viii]

Quite expectedly, Barani was vociferously opposed to Muhammad bin Tughlaq's changed policy towards the indigenous Muslims, particularly those from the oppressed castes. For him the Sultan's appointing such Muslims to high posts was nothing short of anathema, and he minced no words in castigating the Sultan for this. Thus, he complained that the Sultan had appointed the 'low-born' Aziz Khumar, a man from the Kalal caste whose ancestral profession was making liquor, in-charge of Dhar and the whole of Malwa. He was upset that to 'bolster his power and glory' the Sultan had provided him with 'many hundreds of thousands of *tankas*'. Aziz Khumar, he wrote, had been told 'that the root of all strife and conflict are the nobles' and, hence, that if he suspected any of them he was free to finish them off. Barani alleged that Aziz Khumar, whom he calls 'the son of an adulteress', was surrounded by numerous 'despicable and low-born men', and that he was 'puffed up with pride'. He accused him of killing 80 *ashraf umara* or nobles in Dhar after accusing them of fomenting revolt against the Sultan. When the Sultan heard of this, he was, so Barani claimed, so pleased that he sent Aziz Khumar a special robe and fine horses, and 'ordered that everyone should send letters full of love to him and praise his dastardly act.'[ix]

Barani further rued that the Sultan had similarly patronised and raised numerous other 'despicable' men, Muslims of Shudra origin, to high posts, such as Najayya of the caste of professional singers, Aziz Khumar's own brother, a certain Firoze of the Hajjam or barber caste, Miknah of the Tabbakh or baker caste, Masud Khumar, Ludhiya of the Baghban or Mali caste, and 'several other such low-born people'. To many of these, Barani lamented, the Sultan gave vast land grants and 'raised their status above that of the nobles'. Barani noted, with no attempt to conceal his anger, that the Sultan

'granted his closeness' to Shaikh Babu Naik, whom Barani contemptuously referred to as 'that son of a Julaha' (*julaha baccha*). He mentioned that the Sultan granted the post of *diwan-e wazarat* to Pira of the Mali caste, whom he termed 'the lowest of the low and the most despicable of all the despicable in all of Hind and Sindh'. He appointed Kishan Bazran, whom Baran described as 'the most lowly of the low-born' as governor of Awadh, and Maqbal, slave of Ahmad Ayyaz, whom Barani decried as 'in his looks and his character a cause of great shame for all slaves', as governor or Gujarat. Barani also complained that the Sultan 'did not consider the high-born worthy of entering his court'.[x]

Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's Assassination and the Conspiracy to Replace Him With Firoze Shah Tughlaq

The so-called *ashraf* nobility, who were fanatically wedded to caste and ethnic superiority, were, as I have mentioned above, incensed with Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq for appointing oppressed caste indigenous Muslims to top posts in his kingdom. Faced with this very grave threat to their hegemony, they plotted to get rid of him.
The noted historian Maulana Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi writes that in 1346-47 the Sultan dismissed numerous *ashraf umara*, led by Qutlagh Khan, from their posts, suspecting them of being disloyal and finding them guilty of much financial impropriety. This led to great dissatisfaction in the ranks of the *umara* across the country, which was further exacerbated by the fact that the Sultan had appointed several oppressed caste Muslims in the place of the senior administrators whom he had dismissed.[xi] Thereupon, a group of *ashraf umara*, led by Qutlagh Khan, hatched a conspiracy to kill the Sultan. A key actor in the plot was Firoze Shah Tughlaq, whom the conspirators later appointed as Sultan after they succeeded in their mission, and who, in gratitude, richly rewarded them in return. Interestingly, Syed Ziauddin Barani was also a key member of this coterie. Qutlagh Khan also managed to rope in the Chishti Sufi Syed

Khwaja Nasiruddin Awadhi (more popularly known as Chiragh-e Dehli or 'the light of Delhi') as the spiritual guide of the conspirators. Besides him, there were various other self-styled*ulema*, Sufis and other self-styled *ashraf* in this band of traitors. Following Qutlagh Khan's death, the conspirators turned to Syed Nasiruddin for advice and guidance. They also tried to win over some Hindu rulers to their cause, and sent out emissaries to various parts of the country in order to stir rebellion against the Sultan. When revolt broke out in the open in Gujarat, the Sultan hastened there with a large army. Taking advantage of his absence from Delhi, Syed Nasiruddin began making preparations to appoint Firoze Shah Tughlaq to the throne of Delhi.
When the Sultan learned of this, he sent his very close confidante, Ahmad Ayyaz, to Delhi and ordered him to bring the conspirators, including some self-styled *ulema* and Sufi *shaikh*s, as prisoners before the royal army. It is possible that the Sultan would have ordered the execution of Firoze Shah Tughlaq and Syed Nasiruddin, but he died the very day these men were brought before the army.[xii] It is rumoured that the Sultan was poisoned to death by the conspirators, who then manoeuvred to put Firoze Shah Tughlaq on the throne.

Mullah Muhammad Qasim Farishta

As mentioned earlier, Razia Sultana had, in the brief spell of her reign, appointed a former Abyssinian (*habashi*) slave named Qutbuddin Yaqut as her Prime Minister. Incensed with her patronising of what they considered a 'low-born' man, the *ashraf* nobles rose up in revolt, finally succeeding in killing her. Commenting on the fall of Razia, the Mughal period historian Mullah Muhammad Qasim Farishta has this to say:

'There is no need to ponder much on the cause of the fall of Razia. Ever intelligent person can easily understand why this happened. Razia's fall was because Yaqut *habashi* went

beyond the bounds in his power and influence. It is obvious that a mere *habashi* had absolutely no right to be the *amir al-umara* of Delhi. How can a despicable man have any relations with the most powerful person in all of Hindustan?'[xiii] Farishta's ethic and caste prejudices, which he shared with Barani and others of his ilk, are also clearly apparent in his discussion of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq's patronising of the *nau musalman*, the oppressed caste indigenous Muslims. His description is almost identical to that of Barani. He refers to Aziz Khumar as 'low-born' and 'despicable' and laments that the Sultan's appointing him to the post of governor of Dhar and lavishly rewarding him for slaughtering dozens of *umara* that led to the 'low-born' defying the authority of the *shurafa*. He expresses his unconcealed horror of the 'low' born becoming close advisors to the Sultan, taking the place that he believed was rightfully that of the foreign *shurafa*. He attributes all this to the fact that the *ashraf* nobles refused to obey the orders of the Sultan, which led the Sultan to turn to the 'low-born' instead in the belief, as he puts it, that 'slavery is inherent in the very nature of the low-born, and so they would regard the commandments of the Sultan as those of God Himself and unhesitatingly obey them.'[xiv]

The Attitude of the *Ulema* in General

The vast majority of influential *ulema* or Muslim clerics in the period of 'Muslim rule' were from the so-called *ashraf* castes, and it is an undeniable fact that only a very small minority among them were not supporters of social divisions based on caste and ethnicity. Indeed, it would not be wrong to say that most of them were staunch upholders of caste hierarchy. In fact, some scholars claim that all the *ulema* of this period were supporters of caste discrimination. For instance, Muhammad Umar of the Department of History at the Aligarh Muslim University argues:

'The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate witnessed the emergence of a new Muslim society in India. Because Muslim

thinkers at this time were supporters of the division of society on ethnic lines, under no circumstances would they have welcomed the possibility of the Islamic concept of equality being put into practice between the foreign Muslims and those of indigenous origin.'[xv]
Likewise, another historian, Ishwar Topa, writes about the *ulema* or Muslim clerics of this period:

'Islamic commandments were sacrificed for the sake of appeasing the rulers [...] The *ulema* miserably failed in explaining the social rules of Islam in a readily understandable fashion for the people. They had no understanding of India and its problems. They presented Islamic ideals in a distorted theoretical way. They were not the sort of men who could express and promote Islam as a force for fashioning humanity on proper lines. They were the Brahmins of Islam, who exercised a monopoly on the interpretation of the religion. Not only this, they also concealed the true teachings of Islam from the public. They failed in presenting Islam as a constructive force that could unite as brothers the caste-ridden Indian people. As [supposed] missionaries of Islam, they were despicable examples of humanity.'[xvi]

Syed Ziauddin Barani and Muhammad Qasim Farishta were separated by period of more than 200 years but yet they shared identical views about caste, both being utterly contemptuous of the *nau-musalman*s of the oppressed castes. They held the same views about Muhammad bin Tughlaq's patronising of the oppressed castes, which was, by all counts, a truly Islamic policy but one which they fiercely condemned. They both supported the disgruntled *ashraf* who revolted against the Sultan precisely for this Islamic policy and finally succeeded in killing him.

[i] Kunwar Mohammad Ashraf, *Hindustani Ma'ashra Ahd-e Wusta Mai* (vol.1) (Translated by Qamruddin), National Book Trust, New Delhi, pp.128-29.
[ii] Ibid.,p.129.
[iii] Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, *Aina-e Haqiqat*

Numa (Muslim Salatin-e Hind Haqiqat Ke Aine Mai), Shaikh ul-Hind Academy, Deoband, 1997, p.579.
[iv] Ibid., , p. 540.
[v] Ashraf, op.cit., , pp.137-38.
[vi] Ziauddin Barani, *Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi* (Translated by Syed Moin ul-Haq), Urdu Science Board, Lahore, 1983, pp.664.
[vii] Ibid., p.510.
[viii] Quoted in Abdul Hamid Numani, *Masla-e Kufu' Aur Ishaat-e Islam*, Madrasa Ihya ul-Ulum, Vaniyambadi, 1995, pp.5-6.
[ix] Barani, op.cit., pp.714-15.
[x] Barani, op.cit., p. 716-17.
[xi] Najibabadi, op.cit., p.580.
[xii] For details, see Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (Translated by Ehteshamuddin), Munshi Nawal Kishore Press, Lucknow, 1889, pp.146-74.

[xiii] Muhammad Qasim Farishta, *Tarikh-e Farishta* (Translated by Abdul Haye Khwaja), Matkaba-e Deoband, Deoband, 1983, p.262.
[xiv] Ibid., pp. 443-44.
[xv] Muhammad Umar, *Hindustani Tehzib Ka Musalmano Par Asar*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1975, p.87.
[xvi] Ishwar Topa, quoted in Ashfaq Mohammad, *Hindustani Mu'ashre Mein Musalmano Ke Masail*, Patriot Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, p.340.

Part 8: Firoze Shah Tughlaq's Reign

Casteism Triumphant

By Masood Alam Falahi

Sultan Firoze Shah Tughlaq, who succeeded Muhammad bin Tughlaq to the throne of Delhi, was quite a contrast to the latter. He was not well-read, including in religious matters, and nor was he observant of the rules of the *shariah*. Further, he was under the control of the *ashraf*nobles who had revolted against Muhammad bin Tughlaq and had placed him on the throne. He was beholden to them and did not dare act against their wishes. He was also devoted to fake mullahs and Sufis who were ardent supporters of caste discrimination. In order to please the *ashraf* nobles, mullahs and Sufis, he selectively killed various supporters of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, many of who are said to have been orthodox Muslims.[i] But he did not stopat this. He showered these men with lavish favours, appointing them to senior posts and granting them vast landed estates. Just as when Buddhism was extirpated from India Hindu kings bestowed on the Brahmins the posts, land, wealth and prestige that had earlier possessed but had subsequently lost, so, too, the *ashraf* regained their hegemony on the death of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq. As Syed Ziauddin Barani put it, hardly able to conceal his glee, with Firoze Shah Tughlaq ascending the throne 'All the Syeds were blessed with a new life.'[ii]

The new Sultan killed many of his immediate predecessor's confidantes, granted the son of Qutlagh Khan, the ringleader of the conspiracy against Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the exalted title of Alap Khan and included him in the circle of leading nobles, and appointed Qutlagh Khan's brother Nizam ul-Mulk Amir Husain as governor of Gujarat. He gave back posts and perks to numerous mullahs, muftis, qazis and pirs that had been confiscated from them by Muhammad bin Tughlaq, reinstating them in place of those whom Muhammad bin Tughlaq had appointed. Thus, for instance, he removed Abul Fatah Shaikh Ruknuddin Multani from the post of *sheikh ul-islam* because he was opposed to wrongful innovative religious practices (*biddat*) and had been supportive of Muhammad bin Tughlaq.

Syed Jalaluddin Barani commented extensively—and, expectedly, very positively—on Sultan Firoze Shah Tughlaq's generous patronage of the caste-ridden mullahs and Sufis and other *shurafa*. He writes that when the new Sultan ascended the throne he provided lavish robes and gifts to the nobles and large monetary and land grants and to scores of *ulema* and Sufi *shaikhs*. He made huge contributions to the grave-complexes of various Sufis. Many of these *ulema* and Sufis were Syeds, and Barani exulted in this turn in the fortunes of his caste because of the largesse shown towards them by the Sultan. Thus, he wrote that the Sultan, whom he termed 'The Sultan of the Age and Time', had 'surpassed the other rulers of the world in his sincere devotion to the household of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) and in his love for the seal of the Prophets (*khatim al-nabiyyin*), and this sincere devotion and love have reached the farthest limits'. This was expressed, he said, in the presents, lands, posts, and titles that he presented vast numbers of Syeds with, and in the many Syeds he had appointed as his close advisors and senior courtiers. That is why, he said, the Syeds prayed to God to give the Sultan [**khudawand e alam**] a long life.[iii]

Sultan Firoze Shah Tughlaq held the Syeds in great reverence. It is said that in order to avenge the death of three Syeds, he destroyed hundreds of families in Khattar and put to the sword literally thousands of people. He ordered the governor of the province to slay these people, and for several years he himself visited Khattar to do the same with his own hands. Farishta writes that Kharku, the Hindu*chaudhri* of Khattar, near Badaun, invited Syed Muhammad, governor of Badaun, his brother Syed Alauddin, and Syed Mahmud to his house and killed them. When the Sultan learned of this he was inflamed and headed for Khattar with a large army, where he ordered that every house be destroyed. He put the inhabitants of the town to the sword, and, says Farishta, 'so many Hindus were slain that the souls of the deceased Syeds began pleading for them.' Kharku fled to the Kumaon hills, but the

Sultan's army followed him there, destroying and pillaging on the way. Some thirty thousand Hindus, so claims Farishta, were taken as prisoners. Owing to the onset of the rainy season, the Sultan went back to Delhi, and on his return he appointed Malik Daud Afghan as governor of Sambhal, instructing him to visit Khattar every year and slay its inhabitants [mulk ko taraj karey]. This incident took place in 1380. According to Farishta, the Sultan himself returned to Khattar every year after that for the next five years to kill those inhabitants of the town whom Malik Daud Afghan had spared. In this way, thousands of innocent and hapless Hindus were slaughtered by the Sultan for the sake of the three slain Syeds.[iv]

There is, needless to say, no justification for this barbaric slaughter at all in Islam, for the Quran very clearly says, 'No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another' (17:15). The Sultan's utter hypocrisy and his utter lack of concern for Islamic teachings is clearly apparent from this heinous massacre. If he slaughtered thousands of innocent people in revenge for the killing of three innocent Muslims, why, one must ask, when he ascended the throne did he kill so many pious, orthodox Muslims on the instigation of impious men who had wrongfully rebelled against Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq? It is obvious that while he showed no hesitation in slaying these Muslims, he found the slaughter of three Syeds so intolerable that he did not hesitate to kill thousands of people in reaction, although these people had nothing to do with the Syeds' deaths.

While analysing the Sultan's very obvious prejudices in favour of the foreign *shurafa*, particularly the Syeds, it is instructive to examine the supportive attitudes towards caste and untouchability of a leading figure associated with the Sultan, who is widely thought of as a noted Sufi *shaikh*. This person, Syed Husain Jalaluddin Bukhari, more popularly remembered as Makhdum Jahaniyan Jahan Gasht (d. 1384), was appointed to the post of *shaikh ul-islam*, the highest religious

office in the empire, by Sultan Firoze Shah Tughlaq. He was a fervent champion of caste hierarchy and *ashraf* hegemony. He insisted that the so-called low castes should not be given 'too much' education and that what they should be taught should be limited to just the rules related to ritual worship and the fast during the month of Ramadan. He wrongly interpreted a narration attributed to the Prophet to liken the 'low-born' with swine and dogs and to argue, 'Do not educate the low-born so much that they surpass the proper limits and they insult the*ashraf* and the pious predecessors'. [v]

Syed Husain Jalaluddin Bukhari did not stop at this, however. He went on to argue, again wrongly claiming Prophetic sanction for a scurrilous claim, that one must not sit together to eat at the same level with 'low-born' people such as barbers, washers of corpses, dyers, leather-workers, makers of bows and arrows, washermen and alcoholics and usurers.'[vi]

The so-called Prophetic *hadith* narratives that this supposed leading Islamic scholar in Sultan Firoze Shah Tughlaq's realms employed for backing these arguments, it must be noted, are either weak (*zaif*) or wholly fabricated (*mauzu*), and are clearly and unambiguously contradictory to Islamic teachings. And yet the Sultan chose to appoint such a man to the highest religious post in his vast empire.

[i] Akbar Shah Khan Najibabadi, *Aina-e Haqiqat Numa (Muslim Salatin-e Hind Haqiqat Ke Aine Mai),*Shaikh ul-Hind Academy, Deoband, 1997, p. 602.
[ii] Ziauddin Barani, *Tarikh-e Firoze Shahi* (Translated by Syed Moin ul-Haq), Urdu Science Board, Lahore, 1983, p.811.
[iii] Ibid., pp.757-811.
[iv] Muhammad Qasim Farishta, *Tarikh-e Farishta* (Translated by Abdul Haye Khwaja), Matkaba-e Deoband, Deoband, 1983, p.464.
[v] Qazi Sajjad Husain (ed.) *Siraj al-Hidayah: Malfuzat Husain al-Ma'aruf Jalaluddin Makhdum Jahaniyan Jahan Gasht*, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, 1983, p.77.

[vi] Ibid., p.88.

Part 9: Evidence From the Mughal Period

It is likely that, like the Muslim so-called *ashraf*, the Brahmins, too, were greatly angered at Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's patronage of the oppressed caste Muslims. After all, these Muslims, or their forefathers, had once been their slaves. An additional reason, one can surmise, for their probable resentment of the Sultan's policies was that these policies must certainly have made Islam an attractive option for many more Shudras who were desperate to be freed from the yoke of Brahminical tyranny.

At around this time there emerged across parts of India numerous social reformers who bitterly critiqued the caste system and preached an ethical monotheism. Many of them were heavily influenced by Islam. These were the Bhaktas, and the message of *bhakti* or selfless devotion to the one formless God that they taught was very similar to that of the Sufis. It was not, however, that all the Bhaktas were uniformly opposed to caste and caste-based discrimination. Some of them, particularly those of Brahmin origin, did not denounce caste as a social institution as such. The socially radical potential of the Bhakti movements was further limited by the fact that, over time, many of these were transformed into caste-like groups themselves. From being movements of social protest they soon compromised with the caste system. In this way, Brahminism was able to reassert itself and stave off the challenge posed by the Bhaktas, including those who had been deeply influenced by Islamic teachings, such as Kabir, Dadu/Daud and Nanak.

These movements carried on well into the Mughal era and thereafter. The period of Mughal rule did not witness any noticeable change in the attitude of the *ashraf* nobility on the question of caste among Muslims. Indeed, it can be said that the compromises that many Mughal Emperors made *vis-a-vis*the 'high' caste Hindus further reinforced casteist tendencies among the*ashraf*. This, for instance, was certainly the case with regard to the Emperor Jalaluddin Akbar (d. 1605), who held the Syeds in great regard and even exempted

them from capital punishment. He married several ‘high’ caste Rajput Hindu princesses, as did many Mughal emperors before and after him, who were left to practise their own faith.[i] It is likely that through them various Hindu customs, including caste prejudices, gained even more acceptability among the Mughals and the *ashraf* associated with their courts. It is instructive to note that while these Emperors and their associated *ashraf* showed no hesitation in marrying ‘upper’ caste Hindu women, they regarded inter-marriage with indigenous Muslims of Shudra origin with horror.

The Emperor Akbar is lionised in Indian history school textbooks as an allegedly very ‘progressive’, ‘liberal’ and ‘enlightened’ ruler, but as far as the suppressed castes are concerned he was no less oppressive than his predecessors, both Hindu and Muslim, had been. This is clearly evident, for instance, from the following edict that he issued:

‘In the towns, the low-born (*arzal*) should be prohibited from acquiring education, because if these communities do so, it will lead to great strife (fitna).’[ii]

It is evident from this edict that Akbar believed that if the oppressed castes took to education it would threaten the hegemony of the *ashraf*, who would regard them as daring to compete with them and as seeking to rise to their level. Like Akbar, his close advisors and other courtiers, too, were also fiercely wedded to the thoroughly un-Islamic notions of caste and caste-based superiority, as were many supposedly learned *ulema* of this period. To cite just one instance, the noted historian Abul Fazl (d. 1602), a close confidante of Akbar, is said to have remarked, ‘I refuse to regard a statement of a mere confectioner (Halwai), cobbler (Mochi) or skin-seller (*charm farosh*) as evidence.’[iii]

From all this it is clearly evident that in the period of Mughal rule, as before, the caste system was deeply entrenched among the Muslims and that the oppressed caste Muslims

were subjected to various forms of subordination, degradation and oppression. This was reinforced by the vast land grants that successive Mughal Emperors provided to the Muslim *shurafa* of foreign descent and to 'upper' caste Hindus, completely ignoring the oppressed castes, both Hindus and Muslims, who were not considered at all deserving of such honour. If, in some very rare cases, some 'low' caste people received land from the Mughals, it was because they had succeeded in concealing their true caste identities and in passing off as of 'high' caste status.

Even in the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir (d. 1707), lionised by many Muslims as having supposedly been a very pious Muslim, the conditions of the oppressed caste Muslims remained unchanged. Land, power, and learning continued to be monopolies of the 'upper' caste Hindus and Muslims. As Miyan Mohammad Zain ul-Abidin Shahabadi writes:
'A shift was witnessed at the time of Alamgir (Aurangzeb), but this was largely political. The conditions of the poor remained unchanged. Knowledge, wealth and property continued to remain in the hands of the powerful ruling class and those who had a role in the affairs of the Empire.'[iv]

In fact, Aurangzeb, who is berated by Hindu chauvinists as an alleged 'anti-Hindu fanatic', employed a higher proportion of Hindus (all certainly from the 'high' castes) in the top echelons of his administration than even Akbar, who is seen by many Hindus as passionately 'pro-Hindu'. Like Akbar, he generously patronised many Brahmins by granting them land grants and estates for their temples. One of Aurangzeb's wives was a Hindu Rajput from Udaipur. She was the mother of his son Moazzam, who, in turn, married the daughter of a Hindu Rajput chieftain. It must be noted that throughout his life, Aurangzeb never pressurised either his Hindu wife or his Hindu daughter-in-law to convert to Islam. We have no evidence at all to suggest that even Aurangzeb, that supposedly very committed Muslim ruler, did anything at all

for the progress and emancipation of the oppressed caste Muslims. On the other hand, it was under his instructions that a massive manual of Hanafi law, named after him as the *Fatawa-e Alamgiri*, was prepared, which laid down, in a very detailed manner, elaborate rules of*kufu'* relating to social hierarchy and inequality based on birth. The Emperor did not find anything at all wrong with this.

The last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar (d.1862) was the son of an 'upper' caste Hindu woman called Lal Bai. He is projected as an ardent Indian nationalist in Indian history textbooks, but he was no less wedded to notions of caste superiority than his predecessors. In 1857, rebellions broke out throughout much of northern India against the British, aimed at restoring effective power to the Mughals. Ironically, as Syed Ahmad Khan, who went to found the Aligarh Anglo-Mohammadan College, claimed, the most active elements in the revolts were 'low' caste Ansari Muslims, who were contemptuously referred to by the *ashraf* as 'Julahas'. At the height of the revolt, on 24 May 1857, Bahadur Shah Zafar ordered Nawab Syed Hamid Ali Khan to enlist five hundred more people in his army, but, at the same time, clearly specified, as quoted in that day's *Dehli Urdu Akhbar*, 'These men should be from the noble, good and brave *qaum*s of Shaikhs, Syeds, Mughals and Pathans, and not from the low castes.'[v]

The Divergent Attitude of Some *Ulema* of the Mughal Period to Caste

Although the vast majority of the *ashraf ulema* in the Mughal period probably upheld caste distinctions in the name of *kufu'* and *nasb* or lineage, there were some brave others who fervently disagreed with them. One such noted and Islamic scholar was Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlvi (d. 1642), a contemporary of Akbar. He was of the firm opinion that caste, caste-based inequalities and the concept of inferiority (*razalat*) as being associated with some occupations had no basis in Islam, contrary to the views of many other

supposed *ulema*. He closely examined various reports that were passed off as *hadith* narratives, which denigrated certain occupational groups, particularly weavers (Ansaris or Julahas in the Indian Muslim context), and found all of them to be fabricated or *mauzu*.[vi]

Adopting a very contrary position on caste to that of Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlvi was another Delhi-based scholar, the early eighteenth century Shah Waliullah Dehlvi (d. 1762), who belonged to the Shaikh Faruqi caste. He is regarded as one of the most influential and learned Indian *ulema* of all times. Yet, instead of opposing and condemning caste, caste-based discrimination and conventional *fiqh* rules about *kufu'*, he supported them and wrongly sought to provide them with religious sanction. For this purpose, he went to the extent of wrongly interpreting an authentic *hadith* report that recommends that only a person's religiosity be taken into account in choosing a spouse. In order to buttress this skewed interpretation, he took the help of a saying of doubtful veracity attributed to the Caliph Umar. [vii] Accordingly, he wrote:

"The Prophet said that when someone comes to you with a marriage proposal for a person whose religiosity and morals you approve of then you should [accept the proposal and] marry [that person].[viii] If you do not do so, there will be strife and terrible conflict in the land. I [Shah Waliullah] say that from this *hadith* it is not proven that one should not take into account *kufu'* in deciding a spouse. How can this be when inherent in every sort of person is the desire for *kufu'* [...]? People are of different social standing, and the *shariah* does not ignore such things. This is why [the Caliph] Umar had said, 'I forbid women [from marrying] anyone except those of their own *kufu'*'"[ix]

Obviously, Shah Waliullah misinterpreted the actual meaning of the *hadith*report that he quoted to suggest that it called for something the precise opposite of which it actually did. It is

evident that this particular *hadith*simply suggests that if a person approves of a prospective spouse on the grounds of his or her religiosity and morals, he or she must not consider any other aspects, such as the possibility that the person might be poor, ugly or even the offspring of a slave, or that he or she might belong to a so-called low caste.

Opposed to Shah Waliullah's position on caste was a noted contemporary of his, the famous Hanafi scholar Qazi Sanaullah Panipati (d. 1804), who belonged to the Usmani branch of the Shaikh caste. He was a fierce opponent of caste and conventional *fiqh* rules regarding *kufu'*, regarding these as wholly unwarranted and impermissible in Islam. In contrast to Shah Waliullah, he regarded the authentic Islamic position on *kufu'* in marriage as mandating only piety and God-consciousness (*taqwa*) as a criterion for choosing a spouse. He argued that the only factor to take into account in selecting a spouse was his or her piety. 'On the Day of Judgment,' he insisted, 'nothing will be of use other than a person's religion and God-consciousness. He will not be asked about his lineage because then it will not matter who had been the son of whom.' [x]
In his well-known book *Mala Budda Minhu*, a manual on the principles of Muslim jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) that is taught in many traditionalist*madrasa*s across South Asia even today, Qazi Sanaullah Panipati wrote in praise of labour, citing suitable *hadith* reports to back his position on the importance of working for a livelihood. He cited the case of the Prophet David (Daud) who, he said, earned his livelihood through his own labour by making coats of mail. [xi] He also stressed that to boast about one's lineage and denigrate that of others was forbidden (*haram*). 'In the eyes of God', he wrote, 'the most noble is he who is the most God-fearing (*muttaqi*).' [xii]Likewise, in his famous Arabic commentary on the Quran, *al-Tafsir al-Mazhari*, he stridently critiqued widespread conventional *fiqh* rules related to *kufu'*, going so far as to argue that so-called low-caste people, if they possessed knowledge and piety, were of the same *kufu'* as

every so-called*sharif* or high-born Muslim, including even those who claimed descent from the Prophet.[xiii]

Interestingly, although Shah Waliullah supported conventional rules of *fiqh*related to *kufu*' based on caste, his son, Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlavi (d. 1823), a learned Islamic scholar in his own right, considered putative *hadith* reports that belittled certain legitimate occupations and those who engaged in them as false and as having been fabricated after the demise of the Prophet simply to justify social hierarchy. He believed that at least in the first century after the Prophet these reports did not even exist.[xiv]
Another noted Islamic scholar who protested against caste and caste-based discrimination was Haji Shariatullah (d. 1840), who led the Islamic reformist Faraizi movement in post-Mughal Bengal. His struggle was multi-pronged—against the British and the oppressive 'upper' caste Hindu landlords, on the one hand, and against polytheistic customs, caste and caste-based discrimination among the Muslims of Bengal, on the other. One of the major attractions of the movement for the impoverished classes among the Bengali Muslims was precisely its insistence on radical social equality and its firm opposition to social hierarchy within the broader Muslim community, which Haji Shariatullah regarded as wholly contradictory to the teachings of the Quran. This is why, writes Ubaidullah Fahad Falahi, scholar of Islamic Studies at the Aligarh Muslim University, the Faraizi movement 'spread very rapidly among the peasants, Ansaris, Telis and other marginalised classes'. [xv]

Other leading *ulema* in the late Mughal and early British colonial period who condemned the pervasiveness of caste and caste-based discrimination among the Indian Muslims included Shah Ismail Shahid (d. 1831), grandson of Shah Waliullah, and Syed Ahmad Barelvi (d. 1831), leaders of the revivalist *mujahidin* movement that sought to reform the practice of Islam in the country. Citing the Quran and various *hadith* reports, they argued that these practices were

wholly and explicitly un-Islamic and that those who observed or upheld them were doomed to perdition. Shah Ismail deviated from the stance of his grandfather and the position of most of the*ulema* of the Hanafi school on the question of caste. Instead, following the path of the Prophet, he declared that if a woman who had come of age wanted to marry a man of a caste lower than her (and, hence, not of her*kufu'*, in the sense the term is conventionally understood in the *fiqh*tradition), she could do so and no one had the right to dissolve their marriage. In this way, he questioned the very basis of caste among Muslims, which is compulsory caste endogamy or marriage within the same caste circle.

These scholars and leaders of mass movements were like bright stars in an otherwise very dark sky. It would not be wrong to argue that, overall, the period of Mughal rule, that lasted till the British overthrew the dynasty in 1857, proved to be a dark age as far as the oppressed caste Muslims (and Hindus) were concerned. To call it (as also the period of the Delhi Sultans that preceded it) as a period of 'Muslim rule', as our history books do, is wholly misleading. This term conveys the enormously erroneous impression that all Muslims were rulers, while the fact remains that the vast majority of the Indian Muslims, even at this time, were from the oppressed indigenous castes and remained almost as subjugated as they had been prior to their conversion to Islam. The misleading term 'Muslim rule' also obscures the fact that although the ruling class in this period consisted of*ashraf* Muslims of foreign extraction, it also included a substantial number of 'upper' caste Hindus as well.

[i] Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* (Translated by Ehteshamuddin), Munshi Nawal Kihore Press, Lucknow, 1889, pp.306-07.

[ii] Ibid., pp. 356-57.

[iii] Ibid., pp.434.

[iv] Miyan Muhammad Zain ul-Abidin Shahabdi, *Waqiat-e Rayin, Yani Sabzi Farosh Biradri Ke Mukhtasar Halat*, Jamiat ur-Rayin, Muzaffarnagar, 1974, p.45.

[v] Quoted in Atiq Ahmad Siddiqui, *1857 Ke Akhbarat Aur*

Dastavez (publisher's name not given), n.d., Azamgarh, p.100.
[vi] Quoted in Muhammad Hayat Sambhali, *Rafa' an-Naqab 'An al-Nasab wa'l-Kasab Ma'aruf ba Bahar-e Sana'at wa Hirfat*, Qaumi Kutub Khana Press, Bareilly, 1946, p.
p.69-72.
[vii] Imam Dar Qutni and Allama Albani regard this report as weak because its chain of narrators includes the name of one Ibrahim bin Talha, who, according to Hafiz Muzni, never met the Caliph Umar. Allama Albani adds that another name in the chain of narrators of this report was of one Abdullah bin Rawad, whom the *ulema* who have specialized in the names of narrators of such reports (*ulema-e isma ul-rajal*) have not mentioned. Hence, he suggests, this report is weak. The veracity of this report has been doubted by many other scholars who argue that it is incorrect to deduce any rules from it.
[viii] The *hadith* appears in the collections by Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja and Hakim.

The noted scholars Allama Abdur Rahman Mubarakpuri and Shaikh ul-Hind Mamhud ul-Hasan, elaborating on this*hadith*, mention that scholars of Hadith have contended that this means that if one does not give one's daughter in marriage to such a man whose piety (*din*) and morals (*ahlaq*) are pleasing to him, and, instead, falls into the trap of only being concerned about a prospective groom's lineage and looks, great strife and conflict will follow because, they argue, such things are a cause of strife and conflict. Some people have commented on this *hadith* report to argue that if one searches only for a rich and influential spouse for one's child, many men and women would be left unmarried, which would lead to adultery and immorality becoming rife as well as bringing shame and dishonour to their guardians and close relatives, which, in turn, would cause widespread murder and bloodshed. (For details, see Abu Isa Mohammad bin Isa At-Tirmidhi, *Jami' At-Tirmidhi* (vol. 1), Kutubkhana Rashidiya, Delhi, p.128, and Muhammad Abdur Rahman Mubarkpuri, *Tuhfat Al-Ahwadhi Bi Sharh Jami` Al-*

Tirmidhi (vol.4), Dar ul-Fikr, Beirut, n.d., p.205).

In contrast to the majority of the Muslim jurists (*fuqaha*), this *hadith* is considered more valid evidence (*hujjat*) by Imam Malik because it talks of piety as the criterion of *kufu'*, and Imam Malik regarded only this as the basis of*kufu'*.

[ix] Shah Waliullah, *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha* (Translated by Abu Muhammad Abdul Haq Haqqani), Asih ul-Matabe wa Karkhan-e Tijarat-e Kutub, Karachi (n.d.), p.362.
[x] Qazi Sanaullah Panipati, *Mala Budda Minhu*, Kutubkhana-e Imdadiyah, Deoband, n.d., pp.149-50.
[xi] Ibid. P.107.
[xii] Ibid., p.121.
[xiii] Qazi Sanaullah Panipati*, al-Tafsir al-Mazhari*, vol. 7, Idara Isha'at ul-Ulum, Nadwat ul-Musannifin, Delhi, 1985, p.345.
[xiv] Habib ur-Rahman Azami, *Ansab wa Kafa'at Ki Shari' Haisyat*, Markaz-e Tahaqiqat wa Khidmat-e Ilmiyah, Maunath Bhanjan, 1999. p.59.
[xv] Ubaidullah Fahad Falahi*, Tarikh-e Da'awat wa Jihad Bar-e Saghir Ke Tanazur Mai*, Hindustan Publishers, Delhi, 1984, p. 147.

Part 10: Transformations in the Colonial Period

Caste and Religion

With the onset of British rule in India, which was formalised in 1857, the country witnessed the emergence of new religious movements among both Hindus and Muslims. These movements were related to the race for numbers among Hindu and Muslim elites, with political power for each community in the new dispensation linked to its numerical strength. Hindu and Muslim religious revivalist organisations and movements began to vie with each other to bring the oppressed castes into their respective folds. In part, this was clearly motivated by the desire to bolster the political fortunes of the 'upper' caste Hindu and Muslim elites, who

claimed to speak for all of their co-religionists.

Numerous such movements emerged within the larger Hindu fold at this time. Many of them aimed at Hinduising the Shudras and preventing their conversion to Islam and Christianity. Some of them also sought to woo back into the Hindu fold Hindu converts or their descendants who were now Christians and Muslims. One such movement was the Brahmo Samaj, which was founded in 1830 by Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali Brahmin. Although Ram Mohan Roy critiqued many superstitious and idolatrous aspects of popular Hinduism, he did not mount a radical critique of the caste system, Brahminism, and Brahminical supremacy. It is said that, following orthodox Brahminical practice, he employed a Brahmin cook, and refused all his life to remove his *janeo*, the 'sacred' thread that is the distinguishing mark of orthodox Brahmins.

Among the major aims of the Brahmo Samaj were defending Hinduism from the criticism of Christian and Muslim missionaries, halting the rapid conversion of Hindus to Christianity and Islam, Hinduising the Shudras, and, at the same time, preserving the hegemony of the Brahmins. These were aims that it shared with another revivalist neo-Hindu movement that emerged at around this time, the Arya Samaj. This movement was founded in 1875 by a Gujarati Brahmin called Mool Shankar, more popularly known as Dayanand Saraswati. Alarmed by the mass conversion of Shudras, particularly Dalits, to Christianity and Islam, Dayanand sought to prevent them from doing so by offering them the illusion of upward social mobility within the Hindu fold. Thus, for instance, he argued that Shudras, too, had the right to recite the Vedas and don the *janeo*, and claimed that caste was to be based on worth rather than birth.

At the same time as he sought to appeal to the Shudras, Dayanand firmly upheld the caste system and 'upper' caste hegemony. Accordingly, he continued to accept the authority of the *Manusmriti*, which he profusely quoted in his magnum opus *Satyarth Prakash* or 'The Light of Truth'. He approvingly refered to a verse in the *Manusmiriti* that declares a principal

task of the king to be to ensure that all the four *varna*s strictly abide by their *varna*-determined duties, that is to say caste-based roles.[i] In a debate in Benaras with Tara Charan, a Sanatani or orthodox Hindu pundit, he rebuffed the latter for seeking to adduce evidence from the *Puran*as on the grounds that he accepted the authority only of the *Manusmriti* and certain other texts that he claimed were based on the Vedas.[ii] The question thus arises that if Dayanand considered the *Manusmiriti* to be authoritative, how could he possibly be thought to have radically critiqued caste, as is commonly claimed? After all, with the exception of a few verses, the only subjects that the *Manusmriti* talks about are caste, social hierarchy, untouchability, discrimination, Brahminical supremacy and the degradation and exploitation of the Shudras. Given all this, how was it at all possible for the Shudras to find genuine liberation in and through the Arya Samaj?

The fact of the matter is that, despite its claims to social reform and equality, the Arya Samaj stood solidly for caste inequality, discrimination and the *varnashrama dharma*. In fact, Dayanand Saraswati himself showed no qualms in exhibiting his distaste for Chandals, Shudras and other such so-called 'low' castes. For instance, he opined that sinners of a certain sort turned into elephants, horses, lions, wolves, boars and Shudras and Mlecchas[iii], another class into trees, and yet another class into Chandals.[iv] It is true that he declared it permissible for the *dwija*s, the so-called 'twice-born' or 'upper' caste Hindus, to eat food cooked by Shudras, but this should not be thought of as a call for radical social equality, for the argument he gave for this was that the *dwija*s—Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas—had other tasks to do. Further, it is instructive to note that this was not a blanket permission for eating food cooked by Shudras, for Dayanand added that the *dwija*s should desist from eating food cooked in a Shudra's house except under dire necessity, and that too if the Shudra had taken a bath and his clothes were clean. He also insisted that if a Shudra were to cook food in an Arya's home, he should cover his mouth to ensure that his saliva did not touch the food or else it would be contaminated.

Moreover, he added, the Shudra must serve food to the Arya and then eat himself.[v]

In response to a query as to whether there was any harm in eating food cooked by any person being irrespective of caste on the grounds that the bodies of all humans, from Brahmins to Chandals, are made of the same flesh and bones and contain the same blood, Dayanand replied, 'Yes, there is harm. A Brahmin and Brahmini are fed on the very best of foods. Hence, their bodies are formed out of the reproductive elements that are free from impurities and other harmful elements.' But this, he claimed, was not true of the bodies of Chandals and Chandalnis, or Chandal women, which were, so he put it, 'simply laden with dirt and other foul matter.' That is why, he insisted, Brahmins and other 'upper' castes must eat together and desist from eating food touched by Chandals, Bhangis, Chamars and other 'low' castes. [vi]

Despite projecting himself as saviour of the Shudras, Dayanand actually stood for their continued slavery under Brahminism. It was not, as is commonly thought, that he forcefully condemned Brahminism or that he radically challenged all the various oppressive rules that the Brahmins had devised to subjugate the Shudras. Thus, critiquing followers of the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthna Samaj for not abstaining from eating with the English, Muslims and Chandals, Dayanand wrote that these groups were deluded if they thought that by flouting the rules of caste, including those related to commensality, they were reforming society. In actual fact, he argued, they were 'ruining it'.
[vii] Consistent with this belief, Dayananad is said to have refused to eat in the house of even a Brahmin if he knew that food had been cooked by a 'low' caste man or woman. His biographer Pandit Lekh Ram narrates one such incident. In 1879, while on a trip to Dehra Dun, a Brahmo Samajist named Babu Kali Mohan Ghosh invited Dayanand to his house for a meal. Dayanand replied that he had no qualms in eating in his house but added that he had heard that Brahmo Samajists sometimes employed 'low' caste cooks. This, he said, he did not approve of. The Babu admitted that Brahmo

Samajists did not consider it wrong to eat food cooked by anyone, irrespective of caste, but said that he himself did not have a 'low' caste cook. Thereupon, Dayanand agreed to eat at his house.

The next day, Pandit Lekh Ram writes, his own brother, Har Gulal, informed him that Dayanand had accepted the Babu's invitation. Hearing this, Pandit Lekh Ram took some food and went straight to Dayanand's room. He gave the food to him to eat, and told him that he had committed a major blunder by accepting the Babu's invitation because at one time a Bhangi woman used to cook food in his house. Dayanand replied that he had no knowledge of this and that the Babu had cheated him. He returned to the Babu the food he had sent for him and, instead, ate the food that Pandit Lekh Ram had brought. [viii]

From all this it is clearly evident that Dayanand's Arya Samaj aimed not at the emancipation, but, rather, at the subordination of the Shudras so as to preserve and promote Hinduism or Brahminism in the face of the challenge of Islam and Christianity. It aimed at keeping the Shudras firmly within the Hindu fold, at the very bottom of the *varna* hierarchy. Like many other 'upper' caste Hindus of his time, Dayanand felt that if the Shudras were not prevented from converting out of the Hindu fold, the very existence of Hinduism would be under under grave threat since the hegemony of the 'upper' castes rested on the labour and the degradation of the Shudras. That is why the Arya Samaj appeared to make some minor concessions with regard to the rules of caste and untouchability, although these did not amount to any real threat to Brahminical hegemony. Dayanand, it can be said, established the Arya Samaj only to save Brahminism from death. He tried to interpret the Hindu scriptures in such a way as to kill the rising spirit of revolt among the Shudras, to co-opt them firmly into the Hindu fold, and make them even better slaves of the 'upper' castes.

Just as the Arya Samaj tried to woo the Shudras into its fold, Christian missionaries, belonging to various denominations, sought to do the same across large parts of India. The flood of

Shudra converts to Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, Islam, goaded groups such as the Arya Samaj to reach out to the Shudras whom otherwise they might not have been at all concerned about. Christian missionaries brought along with them modern education and medicine, and certainly served the poorest of the poor. Yet, as with the Hindus and Muslims, caste could not be eradicated among the Indian Christians, who continue to be divided on caste lines.

Although the Arya Samajists and the Christian missionaries saw themselves as inveterate foes, they both made concerted attempts to woo Muslims of indigenous Shudra descent and convert them to their respective folds. The Arya Samaj invented the *shuddhi* ritual to bring into the Hindu fold non-Hindus, including Muslims and Christians who had once been Hindus or who were descendants of Hindu converts. In the early 1920s, they scored considerable success in their missionary endeavours among some isolated*nau-musalman* groups of 'low' caste status who had been only very lightly Islamised over the centuries and who still retained many of their pre-Islamic customs and beliefs. To facilitate this missionary campaign, Arya Samajist scholars penned tracts deeply critical of Islam, and engaged in fierce debates with Muslims on religious matters. Christian missionaries did the same. As a response, various Muslim organisations soon emerged to engage in missionary or *tabligh* work. Faced with the challenge of the Christian and Arya Samajist missionaries, these Muslim leaders realised that the existence of caste and caste-based discrimination within the Muslim fold left many 'low' caste Muslim groups vulnerable to apostasy. This was a clarion call to Muslim leaders to wake up from their deep slumber, to combat the evils of caste in their society, to recognise the acute problems of the 'low' caste Muslims, and to try to exemplify, in their own lives and in society at large, the Islamic teachings of social equality and brotherhood.
[i] Dayanand Saraswati, *Satyarth Prakash* (Urdu translation by Pandit Chamopati and edited by Swami Ved Anand Tirath, Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, New Delhi, n.d., pp.88-91.

[ii] Lala Lajpat Rai, *Arya Samaj ki Tarikh* (vol.3), (Urdu translation by Kishwar Sultan), National Council for the Promotion of the Urdu Language, New Delhi, 1997, p.53.
[iii] Saraswati, op.cit., p.252.
[iv] Saraswati, op.cit., p.25.
[v] Saraswati, op.cit., p.263.
[vi] Saraswati, op.cit., p.267.
[vii] Saraswati, op.cit., p.360.
[viii] Pandit Lekh Ram, Quoted in Ghazi Mahmud Dharam Pal, *Arya Samaj aur Swami Dayanand*, Islamia Press, Lahore, p.430.

Part 11: Hindutva, Gandhism, and the Caste Question

The Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS

Faced with the growing assertiveness of Dalits and other Shudras against Brahminical hegemony and with their conversion to other religions, from the early years of the twentieth century onwards increasing numbers of orthodox Sanatani Hindus began to support the Arya Samaj's efforts to convert the indigenous Muslims to the Hindu fold and to Hinduise the Shudras so as to boost Hindu numbers and political clout. This represented a radical change in their attitude, because prior to this they had exhibited no concern at all for the despicable conditions of the Shudras. In his Presidential address to the Hindu Mahasabha in Benaras in 1923, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, a hugely popular Sanatani Brahmin leader, went so far as to appeal to the Sanatani Hindus to accept the Untouchables as 'true Hindus'. [i] It is instructive to note that when Gandhi established the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932 in order to keep the Dalits within the Hindu fold, he arranged for Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya to preside over its first meeting. [ii]

These Brahminical revivalists had by now clearly realised that unless the Shudras were fully Hinduised, there was little that could be done to prevent their mass conversion to Islam and Christianity. If this were to happen, the entire edifice of Brahminical supremacy, based on the labour and the enforced and religiously-sanctioned degradation of the Shudras, would come crashing down. Hence, they realised the need to devise various means to retain the Shudras within the Hindu fold. This was one of the main objectives of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which was established by a group of Maharashtrian Brahmins in 1925. Explaining the reason for its formation, its first supremo, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (d. 1940), confessed that it was because of the emerging and rapidly escalating conflict between Brahmins, on the one hand, and non-Brahmins, on the other. [iii] This conflict was nothing but an expression of the growing assertiveness of the Shudras against Brahminical hegemony.

In order to Hinduise the Shudra and keep them firmly trapped as slaves under Brahmin hegemony, the RSS began spouting

the rhetoric of ‘Hindu brotherhood’. It continues to do this today, and in this way has succeeded in attracting vast numbers of Shudras to its fold. Yet, its firm commitment to Brahminism and caste hierarchy remains unaffected. Thus, the second supremo of the RSS, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (d. 1973), an orthodox Maharashtrian Brahmin, candidly professed that the RSS firmly believed that disparity was an ‘indivisible part of Nature’,[iv] this probably being his way of defending caste- and class-based inequalities and hierarchies. He went on to insist that all efforts to do away with this allegedly ‘natural’ inequality in society were bound to fail. [v] One can clearly discern here a trenchant critique of the demands for equality of the Shudras and their critique of Brahminism. Golwalkar also did not hesitate to lavishly praise the *Manusmriti*, the Bible of slavery for the Shudras. This is clear evidence that the major objective of the RSS is to prevent the conversion of the Shudras to non-Hindu religions, including Islam, and to ensure that they remain as slaves of the ‘upper’ caste Hindus.

Golwalkar did not conceal his passionate commitment to Brahminical supremacy and Shudra slavery. Thus, for instance, he approvingly related the following incident in his *Bunch of Thoughts*:

‘In the South, there was an English officer. His assistant was a local person, probably a Naidu. The orderly of that Englishman was a Brahmin. One day, when this Englishman was walking in a street, followed by his orderly, the assistant came from the opposite side. The two officers greeted each other and shook hands. But when the assistant officer saw the orderly, he took off his turban and touched his feet. The Englishman was amazed. He queried, "I am your senior officer, but you stand erect and just shake hands with me, whereas he is only my peon and you prostrate before him on this busy road. What is the matter?" The Assistant officer replied, "You may be my officer, but you are a *mlechha*. He may be a peon, but he belongs to that class of my people which is held in great respect all down the centuries, before whom it is my duty to bow down."[vi]

In this way Golwalkar clearly sought to argue that a Brahmin, no matter how poorly-educated he might be, like the peon in this story, is worthy of worship by non-Brahmins, no matter how senior they are. This is, in fact precisely is what the Brahminical scriptures preach.

Numerous Dalit ideologues have very rightly pointed out the sinister agenda with regard to the Shudras of the Hindutva lobby as represented by the likes of the RSS. For instance, the noted Dalit leader and scholar, Shankaranand Shastri, a close companion of Dr. Ambedkar, writes:

'The Brahmins started the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [...] to defend and promote the interests of Brahminism and caste hierarchy [...] It is a fact that the RSS was established to save the caste system and the Brahmin priestly class. If the RSS were really sincere in uniting the "Hindus" under one flag, it should make first to destroy caste. The RSS is nothing but a revival of Pushyamitra[vii] tactics to destroy the integrity of the country and divide it into watertight compartments [...] The RSS has been doing the same to revive caste hierarchy and bring about Brahmin rule in India. If this ever happens, the very first victims would be all those born in the Shudra community.'[viii]

Gandhi, Gandhism and the Shudras

Despite the efforts of Brahminical organisations and movements to halt the conversion of Shudras to non-Hindu religions and to stamp out Shudra protest movements against Brahminism, they did not fully succeed. Convinced that as long as they continued to labour under Hindu slavery the Dalits could never be liberated, Dr. Ambedkar expressed the desire to convert, along with a vast number of his fellow Dalits, to Islam. The prospect of so many Dalits turning Muslim so alarmed Hindu leaders, including Gandhi, that they tried to convince Dr. Ambedkar to change his mind.

Gandhi was a vociferous opponent of religious conversion from Hinduism, even though this had for long been the means adopted by the Shudras to escape Brahminical slavery. He

wrote and spoke extensively against such conversion, seeing in it no merit at all, in contrast to the Shudras who had used it as a means to throw off the chains of Brahminical slavery. In this way he sought to prevent the Shudras from converting to Islam or Christianity in search of social liberation, and to keep them firmly within the Hindu fold. For this purpose he took some limited and seemingly reformist steps, such as renaming the Untouchables as 'Harijans' or 'children of God', staying in a sweeper colony, and establishing an organisation called the Harijan Sevak Sangh, ostensibly to work for the 'uplift' of the Shudras. At the same time, however, he did not conceal his ardent commitment to caste and to Brahminism. Thus, for instance, he confessed what he called his 'firm faith in the *varna* system'. He argued that even by birth all human beings were not equal, but, rather, were divided into the four *varna*s; that the varna system was inherent in human nature and was 'scientific'; that caste depended on one's birth and could not be changed; that one must follow one's ancestral caste profession, which was determined for one even before birth, and that one did not have the freedom to choose one's occupation. He also insisted that inter-caste marriage and commensality were not necessary for promoting national unity. Defending Brahminical rules against inter-caste dining, he went to the extent of equating eating with excreting, branding both as negative actions that should be done by oneself, rather than in a group. He claimed that if the *varna* system were abolished, India would lose its very character and fall prey to utter chaos and disorder. Consequently, he announced his fervent opposition to those who desired to destroy the *varna* system. [ix]

It is ironical, however, that despite Gandhi's spirited defence of the*varna* system, he himself did not follow the occupation of his Vaishya*varna*, which was trade and agriculture. Abandoning, against his own stated principles, these professions, he chose to become a lawyer and then a leader and, after that, tried to pass off as a saint.

How does one explain this clear contradiction in Gandhi's words and actions? What was the actual objective of his

philosophical defence of caste? The answer to this is provided by Gandhi himself, who claimed that the Shudra who willingly served the Brahmins and other 'high' caste Hindus, believing this to be his religious duty, and who had no desire for wealth, was worthy of such great respect that God Himself would shower flowers on him.[x] From this ridiculous statement it is clearly apparent that Gandhi's major aim was to ensure that the Shudras remained within the Hindu fold. He was well aware that if the Shudras converted to another religion, say Islam, *en masse*, Hinduism, or, to be more precise, Brahminism, would be utterly destroyed, as would 'upper' caste Hindu hegemony. This is why he took some supposed reformist steps with regard to caste discrimination, although he was careful that these should not undermine in any way the edifice of 'upper' caste power. Most Dalit intellectuals, including Dr. Ambedkar, regarded these policies of Gandhi as a Brahminical conspiracy, and did not hesitate to call Gandhi an agent of Brahminism. They rightly pointed out that Gandhi wielded all these many weapons in order to keep the Dalits as slaves of Brahminism.

Thus, Shankaranand Shastri, who himself witnessed the work of Gandhi among the Dalits and roundly denounced it, writes:

'The Harjian Sevak Sangh was nothing but a Brahminic conspiracy to kill the Untouchables by lip-sympathy and thereby make them better Hindus, meaning, thereby, better slaves. The management of the Sangh was deliberately allowed to pass entirely into the hands of the upper castes of the Congress. Babasaheb [Ambedkar] charged that the policy of the Sangh was to exclude Untouchables from the framing of its policies. Its sinister aim was to draw the Untouchables into the Congress [...] [and] thus enslave them permanently. During the past five decades, the Sangh has done nothing, and now its social work is completely stopped.'[xi]

In a similar vein, V.T. Rajshekar, author of the widely-read Dalit journal*Dalit Voice*, calls Gandhi a 'devious agent of the Brahminical system' who 'hatched a conspiracy to allow the Untouchables to enter Hindu temples so that the Untouchables, who are not Hindus, and have never been

Hindus, and who have had nothing at all to do with Hindu temples, were branded along with the Hindus.'[xii]

Yet another leading Dalit ideologue, S.L. Sagar, holds Gandhi responsible for keeping the Dalits oppressed even today by denying them the right to separate electorates. This, he explains, ensured that the Dalits 'remained the slaves of the Hindus'. He describes Gandhi's calling the Dalits as 'Harijans' and demanding temple entry for them as 'chains of slavery that ensured that the Dalits remained as servants of the Hindus'.[xiii] He writes that when Dr. Ambedkar announced his impending conversion to a non-Hindu religion as a means for the emancipation of the Dalits, Gandhi realised that this would gravely threaten Hindu rule in India as well as the very existence of the Hindu religion. That is why, he says, Gandhi devised some cosmetic supposed reformist measures, hoping, thereby to prevent the Dalits from abandoning Hinduism in their struggle for liberation.[xiv]

[i] Bipin Chandra, Quoted in Salahuddin Usman, *RSS: Ta'limat wa Maqasid*, Nizami Offset Press, Lucknow, 1993, p.72.
[ii] Shankaranand Shastri, *My Memories and Experiences of Baba Saheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar*, Bheem Sadan, Ghaziabad, 1989, p.27.
[iii] Quoted in Danish Riyaz, 'RSS: Chand Jhalkiyan', in *As-Salam*, January-March 2001, vol.5 no.1, p.40.
[iv] Quoted in Usman, op.cit., p.197.
[v] Usman, op.cit., p.197.
[vi] http://www.golwalkarguruji.org/shri-guruji/thoughts/

bunch-of-thoughts-book/part-two-the-nation-and-its-problems/territorial-nationalism. (accessed on 10th November, 2010). Naidus, it should be noted, are Shudras.
[vii]
[viii] Shastri, op. cit., pp.61-67. Incidentally, Shastri was present when Golwalkar came to meet Ambedkar to seek his help in lifting the ban imposed on the RSS in 1948 following the murder of Gandhi.
[ix] For details, see B.R. Ambedkar, vol. 9, pp.277-291, and vol. 1, p.90 (Quoted in Sheetal Markan et.al., *Tri Iblisi Soshan Viyuh Vidhvans*, Shoshan Samaj Jagrukta Muhim, Nagpur, 2002).
[x] Ibid., vol. 9, p.291.
[xi] Shastri, op.cit., pp.27-28.
[xii] V.T. Rajshekar, *Bhoodevata ki Bat-Cheet* (Translated by Khalil ur-Rahman, S. Mujeeb & Iqbal Ahmad Sherif), Dalit Sahitya Academy, Bangalore, n.d., p.4.
[xiii] S.L. Sagar, *Hindu Mansikta*, Sagar Prakashn, Mainpuri, n.d., p.9.
[xiv] S.L. Sagar, *Harijan Kaun Aur Kaise*, Sagar Prakashan, Mainpuri, 1999, pp.11-14.

Part 12: Modern Indian Ulema on the Caste Question

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and His Justification for Ashraf Hegemony

Alarmed at the prospects of vast numbers of Shudras seeking to escape caste slavery by converting to Islam and Christianity, 'upper' caste Hindu leaders launched various movements and organisations to Hinduise them and thereby keep them firmly within, and at the bottom of, the Hindu fold. The ostensible reforms that they engendered or advocated with regard to the rules of caste may not have represented a genuine change of heart at all on their part. Nor were they really radical. They might simply have been well-devised tactics to prevent the Shudras from abandoning Hinduism. This continues to be the case even today. Be that as it may, it is instructive, and, at the same time, deeply shocking, to note that while some 'upper' caste Hindu reformers were indeed willing to launch movements to critique some aspects of caste discrimination among the Hindus, and even to criticize some aspects of Hinduism, which itself is based principally on caste, till this very day there has not been a single organised effort or movement with the aim of putting an end to caste and caste-based discrimination and hierarchy among the Indian Muslims despite the fact these social evils have no sanction whatsoever in Islam, if properly understood. It is true that some Muslim intellectuals, including certain *ulema*, have tried to address this question in their own individual capacity, but it is the terrible fortune of the Muslim *ummah* that many supposedly great *ulema* and other Muslim intellectuals, past and present, have not only not done anything to combat these evils but have, directly or otherwise, even gone to the extent of arguing that caste and casteism are, in fact, 'Islamic'.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) is regarded as a great Indian Muslim intellectual, reformer, educationist, and Islamic modernist. He was the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which was later converted into the Aligarh

Muslim University. An ardent champion of modern education, he was a passionate supporter of British colonial rule.[i] It is erroneous to imagine, as many do, that he was concerned about the welfare of all, or even most, of the Indian Muslims. The fact of the matter is that he had no concern at all for the pathetic conditions of the vast majority of the Indian Muslims, who were of indigenous Shudra origins. Contrary to popular perception, he was bothered about the welfare of only the so-called *ashraf* among the Muslims. Moreover, he was firmly committed to preserving and reinforcing caste hierarchy among the Muslims and to the continued domination of the so-called 'low' caste Muslims at the hands of the*ashraf*.

Syed Ahmad's attitude towards the 'low' caste Muslims can be gauged from his description of the Revolt of 1857, in which disaffected Muslims played a major role. Syed Ahmad frantically sought to save the *ashraf* from being blamed for instigating, leading and participating in the Revolt, fearing that otherwise the British would take even more drastic measures against them than they already had. Recognising that the British could not now be dislodged from power, he knew that the fortunes of the *ashraf*crucially depended on the goodwill of the British. Hence, he made every effort to convince the British of his claim that the *ashraf* had little or no role to play in the Revolt, which he blamed entirely on 'low' caste Muslims. The Revolt, he argued, was the handiwork of ignorant 'riff-raff' (*jahils*), and not of the Muslim 'elites' (*ra'is*). In this way, he sought to impress on the British that the *ashraf* were their loyal servants. At the same time, he repeatedly appealed to his fellow *ashraf* to remain faithful to the British Raj. Further, he consistently defended *ashraf* privileges and vehemently denounced demands for equality and self-respect for the 'low' caste Muslims. He even sought to instigate the British against the latter by insisting that they were not faithful to the Raj.

In an address to the second convention of the Muhammadan Educational Conference in Lucknow in 1887, Syed Ahmad

claimed said that 'lowly (*adna*) families' were 'not useful (*mufid*) for the country or for the Government'. In contrast, the 'nobles (*ra'is*) of high-status ('*ala*) families', he insisted, were loyal to the British and so 'are useful to the country and the Government'. He referred to 'Pathans, Syeds, Hashmis[ii] and Quraishis[iii]' as his 'own brothers' (*hamare bhai*), 'from whose blood', he said, 'the smell of the blood of Abraham emanates'. He shared their hope that they would be employed in top posts in the British Army, 'wearing shimmering uniforms'. He assured them that this would happen soon, but for this, he added, they would have to win the favour of the British. He also advised the Muslim *ashraf* attending the conference that only through higher modern education could they succeed and progress.[iv]

Syed Ahmad repeated his advice to the Muslim *ashraf* to remain firmly loyal to the British in an article he penned in the weekly journal *The Loyal Mohammadans of India*. Therein he claimed, against all evidence, that in the course of the Revolt 'if any community sided with the British, it was the Muslims. We can in no way support those Muslims who sided with the rebels [...] Their behaviour was detestable. Their participation in this animalistic massacre is simply inexcusable.'[v]

In the above-quoted reference, Syed Ahmad used the word 'Muslim' (*musalman* in the Urdu original), but it is apparent from his other speeches and writings that by this term he meant simply the so-called *ashraf*.

To defend the *ashraf* from the wrath of the avenging British in the aftermath of the 1857 Revolt, Syed Ahmad penned a treatise titled *Asbab-e Baghawat-e Hind* or 'The Causes of the Indian Revolt'. In it he accused the so-called 'low' caste Ansaris, whom he abusively referred to as 'Julahas', for 'being the most active' in the Revolt.[vi] Ali Anwar argues that the publication of this book in Urdu, and then its translation into English, was a well-designed strategy to convince the British of the claim that the *ashraf* were loyal to them and that the

Muslims who had revolted against them were from the 'low' castes.[vii] In this way, Syed Ahmad and his fellow *ashraf* supporters sought to win the favour of the British, even if this meant instigating the latter against the so-called 'low' caste Muslims.

Syed Ahmad's visceral opposition to the emancipation of the 'low' castes, Muslims as well as others, can be gauged by further examining his speech to the second convention of the Muhammadan Educational Conference referred to earlier. In this speech he vehemently opposed the suggestion that members of the Legislative Council be democratically elected because, he argued, in this way 'ordinary' people (and this included, in particular, people of 'low' caste background, Muslim, Hindu and other) could also be chosen. In this event, he wrote, expressing his horror, such men would 'address the Viceroy' and 'sit at the same table' as the so-called *ashraf*. This he regarded as a wholly unacceptable prospect. He insisted that only men from 'high' families could have that honour. He argued that membership of the Legislative Council be restricted to those of 'high' caste, and that it must not be based on merit or ability for on that basis men of 'low' caste might be elected or nominated. As he put it, the Government should reserve the Council only for those *ra'is* 'whom it considers worthy and respectable enough to occupy [the Council's] seats'.[viii] Dismissing the suggestion that the Government nominate men to the Council on the basis of their merit and capacity, he remarked:

'In order to sit with the Viceroy in the Council, it is essential that members be respectable (*muaziz*) men among the most respectable men of the country. Will the *ra'is* of our country ever like it if a man of low status (*adna darja*), even if he has acquired a BA or even an MA degree, rule over them and control their wealth, property and respect? Never! Not a single [*ra'is*] will approve of this (*Cheers*). A seat in the Government's Council is a very honourable thing. The government is bound not to permit anyone but a respectable

person to occupy it. The Viceroy cannot refer to him [a man from other than a 'respectable' family] as "My Colleague" or "My Honourable Colleague". Nor can [such a person] be invited to royal dinners or to royal conventions, where dukes, earls and other very respectable men gather. Hence, the Government cannot at all be blamed for nominating [only] *ra'is* [to the Council].'[ix]

Syed Ahmad's dogged opposition to social equality and to the progress of the 'low' castes, Muslims as well as others, led him to fiercely oppose the holding of examinations for the Indian Civil Service simultaneously in India and in England. Had this been allowed, it would have benefitted 'low' caste candidates, who, unlike the so-called 'respectable nobles' whom Syed Ahmad represented, could not have afforded to travel to England for the examinations. But the prospect of 'low' caste people entering the Civil Services was too horrific for Syed Ahmad to tolerate and he vociferously condemned the suggestion that the examinations be held in India as well. His utter disdain for the 'low' castes, Muslims and others, is readily apparent in what he had to say in the defence of his position in this regard:
'It is apparent that in Britain every person, high and low, be he the son of a duke, an earl, a gentleman or a nobleman or the son of a tailor or any family belonging to the lower orders, can equally compete for the [Indian Civil Service] examinations. The Europeans who pass this examination and come here [India] are of both lowly as well as high-status families. You all must certainly believe that people from lowly families are not useful for the country or for the Government [...] But the [civil servants] who come from England are so far from our eyes that we have no idea if they are the sons of lords or dukes or tailors (Cheers), and if [among them] a lowly man rules over us, it is concealed from our eyes [...] But the noble (*sharif*) communities (*qaumen*) of India would not like a low-grade [Indian] person, whose roots they know well, to rule over their lives and wealth (*Cheers*).'[x]

Given Syed Ahmad's passionate commitment to his fellow *ashraf* and his fierce opposition to the progress and emancipation of the indigenous Muslims of Shudra origin, it is hardly surprising that the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, also known as the Madrasat ul-Ulum, which he set up in Aligarh was originally meant only for the*ashraf*. As Abu Khalid Bin Saidi comments:
'It is clear from most of the writings of the late Syed Ahmad Khan that he established the Madrasat ul-Ulum at Aligarh in order to rehabilitate the *ashraf*class in the wake of the destruction wrought by the Revolt. That is why till 1947 the character certificate of students graduating from [the college] clearly mentioned: "This person comes from a noble (*sharif*) family of his district".'[xi]

Likewise, Abdur Rahman Abid candidly remarks, 'Sir Syed's target, through the Aligarh movement, was the *ashraf*. It was for the *ashraf* alone that he laid the foundation of the Aligarh college.' Similarly, Syed Muhammad Hashim Kidwai, a former Member of Parliament who taught for many years at the Aligarh Muslim University, confesses that Syed Ahmad 'unfortunately did not oppose the conflict (*fitna*) between the *ashraf* and the *ajlaf*' and, moreover, 'advised that Western education be limited only to the*ashraf*'.[xii] Echoing this view, the noted French scholar of Indian Muslim history, Marc Gaborieau, mentions that Syed Ahmad insisted on numerous occasions that his college was not meant for 'Julahas', or, in other words, non-*ashraf* Muslims.[xiii]

What these commentators have claimed is undeniably true. Their assertions are reinforced by Syed Ahmad Khan's speech to the second convention of the Muhammadan Educational Conference in Lucknow in 1887, referred to earlier, where he mentioned, 'My attention has always been drawn to the issue of the education of my Muslim brethren (*meri musalman bhai*)'. In the same speech he spoke of his 'brothers' as being 'Pathans, Syeds, Hashmis and Quraishis'[xiv]. Taken together,

these statements suggest that as far as he was concerned, only the so-called *ashraf* were actually Muslims.

That Syed Ahmad believed in modern education only for the *ashraf* and not for the other Muslims is also apparent from a speech he delivered at Jalandhar in 1894, where he advocated a limited form of education for Muslim women's education but mentioned in this regard only *ashraf* women. Thus, after expressing his opposition to Muslim families sending their daughters to schools, he said:
'I very forcefully advise that the *ashraf* should get together and make arrangements for their daughters that should be patterned on the traditional style [of education] that was once in place.'[xv]

To repeat a point already made above, while Syed Ahmad Khan passionately argued for modern, Western-style education for the *ashraf*, he was forcefully opposed to such education for the so-called 'low' caste Muslims, who form the vast majority of the Indian Muslim population. This was because while he wanted the *ashraf* to prosper under the British, for which modern education was indispensable, he also wanted the so-called 'low' castes to remain under the subordination of the *ashraf*, which was only possible if they continued to be denied access to modern education.

This sharp contradiction in Syed Ahmad's attitude to modern education and his firm opposition to the emancipation of the 'low' caste Muslims through modern education is clearly brought out in the following incident. Once, Syed Ahmad Khan was invited to a function organised by the Madrasa Anjuman-e Islamiya, a *madrasa* in Bareilly where poor 'low' caste Muslim students studied. There, he was presented with an address by the *madrasa* authorities, wherein the authorities suggested the need for its students to study modern disciplines along with traditional Islamic subjects. In response to the address, he delivered a speech wherein he commented:

‘In your address you have mentioned that we should not hesitate to acquire the knowledge of other communities. Perhaps by this is meant the teaching of English. But, I tell you, with regard to a *madrasa* like yours, teaching English is a very grave blunder. There is no doubt that there is a pressing need for [knowledge of] the English language and for the teaching of British sciences (*angrezi ulum*). It is incumbent on the leaders (*sardar*s) and nobility (*sharifon*) of our community (*qaum*) to provide higher education to their sons in the British sciences. No one is a greater supporter of the spread of English education and sciences among the Muslims than me. But there is a time and place for everything. I have seen that in your *madrasa*, located in the courtyard of a mosque [...], there are 75 boys engaged in studying. Given the status (*haisiyat*) and the class of these boys, it is useless to teach them English. Keep them busy with the old system of [*madrasa*] education—that is better for them and for the country [...] It would be appropriate if you could make efforts to teach the boys to read and write a bit, some basic mathematics enough for necessary work, and a few small booklets through which they can learn the rules of ritual worship (*namaz*), fasting (*roza*) and the simple beliefs of the Muslim religion (*musalmani mazhab*).’[xvi]

This, in brief, was how the man glorified as the harbinger of modernity among the Indian Muslims, and projected as an intrepid revolutionary, viewed the burning question of caste and caste-based hierarchies and inequalities among the Indian Muslims.
[i] In numerous places in *his Asbab-e Baghawat-e Hind*, Syed Ahmad refers to the British Raj as ‘our Government’ in order to exhibit his loyalty. In his address to the Muhammadan Educational Conference in Lucknow in 1887 he went so far as to insist:

‘If my good fortune permitted and I became the Viceroy, I assure you that as a very strong Viceroy I would firmly preserve Empress Victoria’s government in India. The virtues

that any government ought to possess are exhibited by the British Government.' (Syed Ahmad Khan, *Khutbat-e Sir Syed*, [compiled by Muhammad Ismail Panipati], Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, Lahore, 1973, pp. 9-10).

[ii] Muslims who claim descent from the tribe of Banu Hashim, to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged.

[iii] These Quraishis, distinct from Muslims of the Qasai or butcher caste who also call themselves by this term, claim to be descended from the Quraish clan to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged.

[iv] Khan, op.cit., pp.24-27.

[v] Quoted in Ali Anwar, *Masavat ki Jang: Pas-e Manzar Bihar ke Pasmanda Musalman*, Vani Parkashan Delhi, 2001, p.101.

[vi] Syed Ahmad Khan, *Asbab-e Baghawat-e Hind*, University Publishers, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 1958, p. 60.

[vii] Anwar, op.cit., p. 101.

[viii] Khan, *Khutbat*…, op.cit., p.5.

[ix] Khan, *Khutbat*…, op.cit., p.6.

[x] Khan, *Khutbat*…, op.cit., pp. 12-13.

[xi] Abu Khalid Bin Saidi, quoted Ashfaq Mohammad Khan, (ed.) *Hindustani Mu'ashre Mein Musalmano Ke Masail*, Patriot Publishers, New Delhi, 1990, p.341.

[xii] Syed Muhammad Hashim Kidwai, 'A Nikal ke Maidan Mai Dozakhi ke Khane Mai', *Roznama Rashtriya Sahara*(Urdu), 30 December, 2001, New Delhi, p.3.

[xiii] Quoted in Dileep Karanth, *Caste in Medieval India: The Beginnings of a Re-Examination* (http://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/h_es/h_es_karan_caste.htm)

[xiv] Khan, *Khutbat*…,op.cit., p.3.

[xv] Khan, *Khutbat*…,op.cit., p. 279.

[xvi] Quoted in Atiq Siddiqui, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Ek Siyasi Muta'ala*, Maktaba Jamia, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 144-45.

Part 13: Casteism in the Aligarh Muslim University

By Masood Alam Falahi

Leave alone permitting ‘low’ caste Muslims to study at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (which later became the Aligarh Muslim University or AMU), such Muslims were not considered to be equal even in religious terms at the institution that Syed Ahmad established. This is strikingly brought out, for instance, in a reference to the institution by the noted Deobandi scholar Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi (d.1943) in his book Ashraf al-Jawab, where he wrote:

‘An Englishman once visited the Aligarh College where he saw the students, all sons of ra‘is, studying, and noticed their servants standing far from them. They could not sit near their masters. But when they prayed [in the mosque] they stood next to them. The Englishmen asked those sons of ra‘is if their servants, by standing together with them during prayer, were not insulting them. They replied that [the servants] dared not even in the least try to act as their equals after the prayers gave over. The rules [of prayer] required them [they said] to observe equality while at prayer, but for everything else the rules were different.’[i]

It appears that in the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College it was not only the ‘low’ caste Muslims who were subjected to such inhuman and un-Islamic treatment. Even the so-called ashraf were treated differently according to their wealth and family background, this being the official policy of the College. Atiq Siddiqui, a former teacher at the AMU, writes that owing to fierce opposition against him in the media, Syed Ahmad Khan expanded his college, entry to which had been restricted only to sons from leading ashraf families, to include some ashraf students from lower-middle class families as well. Siddiqui explains that the students were divided into three categories, based on their class background and their ability to pay. Each category had separate boarding halls that served distinctly different types of food. The food in the third category of halls, which were meant for students from lower-middle class ashraf families, was pathetic and the halls themselves were filthy.[ii] This classification of the students played a crucial role in reinforcing class prejudices among

them, which were already deeply ingrained owing to the overall very feudal culture that the Aligarh College, and, later, University, represented and championed.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the sort of casteism and caste-based hierarchy that Syed Ahmad so fervently defended is still to be found in the AMU even today. I spent four years in that university, between 1999 and 2003, doing my graduation, and I could not help noticing how deeply-rooted caste consciousness and other such feudal attitudes still remained. Students, especially from ashraf background, tended to treat bearers, cooks and other helpers with disdain and scorn. Even today the university refuses to allow for reservation of seats for 'low' castes in any important professional courses, in contrast to most other Indian universities.

In the course of my interaction with some Muslim teachers at the AMU who were personally opposed to caste I learned that caste plays a very important role even in the selection of teachers in the university. A senior professor of the university, who happens to be a Syed, and is very opposed to caste discrimination, believing it to be un-Islamic, once addressed an Islamic programme wherein he talked about the need to end caste discrimination among Muslims. He mentioned that once he heard some professors of the AMU, which is considered to be the 'educational fortress' of the Indian Muslims, gossip among themselves, complaining, 'This person is a Julaha. That person is a Kunjara. And that person is a Dhuniya. Now the low caste folk have reached all the top posts, and have even become imams of mosques!' The professor related that he sternly admonished these other professors, saying, 'Don't you have anything else to talk about than this un-Islamic practice?' The other professors fell silent in embarrassment.

This professor's experience is not an isolated one. In the course of the years I spent at the AMU I heard students and even bearers and cooks talk about caste on numerous

occasions and even labelling others as of ‘low’ caste.

Despite the fact that casteism remains so deeply rooted in the Aligarh Muslim University, to date no steps have been taken to address this menace. In this regard, the contrast with the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, which is considered to be a bastion of Communism and, therefore, ‘irreligiousness’, is striking. I speak from experience here because I spent two years, from 2005 to 2007, at the JNU doing my post-graduate studies. The JNU has a very active cell where complaints about discrimination against ‘low’ caste students and employees can be registered. I have personally witnessed several ‘upper’ caste Hindu, including Brahmin, student leaders of JNU, belonging to leftist organisations like the All-India Students Association and the Students Federation of India, and even to the RSS-affiliated Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, staging demonstrations, taking out marches and even going on hunger-strike for the rights of ‘low’ caste students that were being overlooked in the university. Nothing of this sort has ever happened at the AMU, where the problems of ‘low’ caste students receive virtually no attention. Students’ groups at the AMU have never demonstrated any such concern for the ‘low’ castes, not even for the Muslims among them. All this is a reflection of a deep hostility to, or, at the very least, total indifference towards, the plight of the ‘low’ castes in this ashraf bastion. Another reflection of this undeniable and very deeply-rooted prejudice against the ‘low’ castes is the fact that ever since it was founded, not a single ‘low’ caste Muslim has been appointed as the Vice Chancellor of this institution.

It is very instructive to compare the attitudes of Hindu and Muslim intellectuals, as represented, for instance, by numerous ‘upper’ caste Hindus in the JNU and ashraf Muslims in the AMU, on the case question. Although Hinduism is based on caste and is inconceivable without it, many ‘upper’ caste Hindu intellectuals vehemently denounce casteism, have written extensively on the problems of the Dalits and other oppressed Shudras, and are engaged in socio-political

movements against caste discrimination. The contrast with the Muslim case is striking. Although Islam sternly denounces caste, the ashraf intellectuals have shown no interest in the myriad problems of the 'low' caste Muslims. They have written virtually nothing at all about them. Nor have they organised any movements to end the menace of caste and caste-based discrimination within the larger Muslim fold.